

THE INFLUENCE OF GREEK TYPES, CONVENTIONS,
AND TECHNIQUES ON RECENT DRAMA

by

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INTRODUCTION

All modern drama of the Western World originated in Greece, in the Athenian capital of the ancient state of Attica. It was in the city of Athens during the latter half of the sixth century B.C. and the first part of the fifth century B. C. that the traditions of dramatic art were developed. Many of these traditions have been continued to the present time.

It has been the purpose of this author to discover what particular Grecian types, conventions, and techniques influence our modern dramatists in the writing of their plays.

The author, in attempting to carry out this aim, better acquainted herself with representative Greek dramas and dramatists. Special consideration was given to techniques and conventions, rather than subject matter unless the latter proved to be of pertinent value in this study. A section explaining the more outstanding features in Greek drama, such as the use of choruses, masks, etc., is found in this paper as a partial introduction to the main work.

The next step taken was the reading of numerous modern dramas. The intent was to discover if the modern dramatist employed any of the Grecian methods that the author had found in her Greek reading. Many plays were discarded for the purposes of this paper. Some of these plays actually and honestly could not be entirely eliminated because even they may have recognized the adherence to the three unities of time, place, and action as

outlined first by Aristotle. However, these more or less intangible influences are discussed here merely in the Conclusion.

The plays selected for this paper attempt to point out the more deliberate uses of Grecian devices, rather than an unconscious acceptance and use of them.

REVIEW OF GRECIAN DRAMA

The Greek Theatre

All the extant plays of the three great Grecian tragedy writers, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, were written during the fifth century B. C. To bring about a clearer understanding of the theatrical conventions of that period, this paper will give first an explanation of the physical theatre of the fifth century B. C. so that the reader will more fully appreciate the difficulties the Grecian dramatist encountered as compared with the modern dramatist who has many technical devices at his fingertips.

A person attending a Grecian dramatic performance in the latter half of the fifth century B. C. would find himself seated in the theatron, or koilon, a semi-circular, curved bank of seats, resembling in many respects the closed end of a horseshoe stadium. He has climbed up the steps (klimakes) to reach his seat, which is in a section (kerkis). Below him, in the best location in the theatre, is the throne of the priest of Dionysus, who presides in a sense over the whole performance, which is principally religious in nature. The theatron is large--in fact, the Theatre

of Dionysus at Athens seated 17,000 persons.

Before the spectator is a level circular area called the orchestra, which means literally the "dancing place." An altar stands prominently in the center of the orchestra. This altar quite often is used as a piece of stage-property in the plays. Some of the dramatic action will take place in the orchestra as well as the dances and maneuverings of the Chorus. At the right and left of the theatron can be seen the parodoi which are entrances and exits for the patrons and are also used by the Chorus.

The skene or scene building lies directly beyond the circular orchestra. At first, the skene was only a wooden structure, but later it became a permanent stone building. The skene usually represents the facade of a house, a palace, or a temple. Most of the action, therefore, takes place before this front. Occasionally, the use of painted panels changes the setting slightly. Three doors are found in the skene and serve as additional entrances and exits for the performers. Immediately in front of the scene-building is a level platform, possibly only a single step above the level of the orchestra. This proskenion is where the main action of the drama takes place.

The dramatist of this period had only two mechanical devices at his disposal. The first, the eccyclema, was a kind of a platform on wheels which was rolled out from the skene, and in this position was supposed to represent an interior scene. Euripides and Aristophanes seem to have used the eccyclema more often than did the other dramatists whose plays we have.

THEATRON OR KOLON

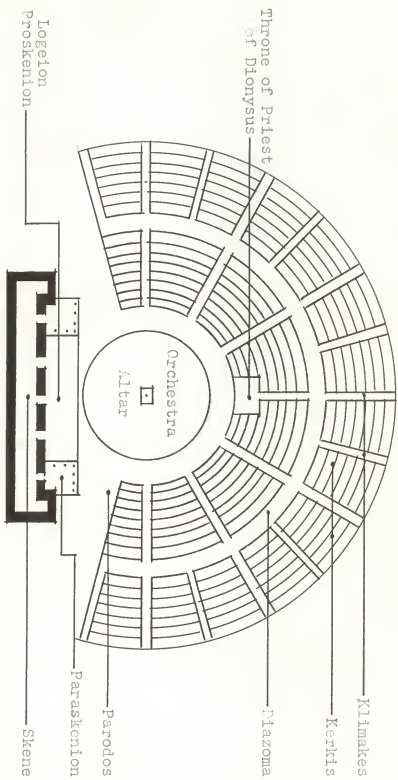


Figure I.

The other mechanical device was the "machine." At the end of many of the plays the dramatist introduced a god who would naturally be expected to appear from above. Apparently he was brought in by some kind of a crane or derrick, called the "machine." Because the god was introduced usually to disentangle the complicated threads of the dramatic action and often merely because the dramatist could not himself work out a denouement from the elements already in the situation, the term deus ex machina, the "god from the machine," has become standard in dramatic criticism. It refers to awkward, mechanical, and unconvincing means which a playwright is forced to employ if he cannot work out a satisfactory resolution to his plot.¹

Origin of Comedy and Tragedy

Aristotle says that both tragedy and comedy began in improvisations, tragedy arising from the dithyramb, a choral poem properly in honor of the god Dionysus, and comedy arising from the phallic songs.² All drama at Athens was a part of the worship of Dionysus, the divinity of fertility, also the god of wine, which he was said to have brought to Greece. During two of his festivals, the Lenaea in January-February and the Great or City Dionysia in March-April, plays were produced in the theatre sacred to him located on the southeast side of the Acropolis.

¹W. J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr., The Complete Greek Drama, Vol. I, pp. XIV-XVIII.

²Aristotle, Treatise on Rhetoric, p. 414.

The ancient theatre was a religious institution, therefore, not a commercial enterprise. A state official selected the plays to be given at the religious festival, and the state furnished the actors and assigned wealthy citizens to train the Chorus. It was the custom that on a festival day one dramatist would present three tragedies and a satyr-play. Only three actors were furnished for each set of plays. Three playwrights participated in each festival, and three prizes were awarded by a panel of judges.

Aristotle defines tragedy as:

An imitation of a worthy or illustrious and perfect action, possessing magnitude, in pleasing language, using separately the several species of imitation in its parts, by men acting, and not through narration, through pity and fear effecting a purification from such like passions.³

By "pleasing language" Aristotle meant language possessing rhythm, harmony, and melody.⁴

P. W. Marsh says a Greek tragedy is:

A dramatic and choral presentation of an action usually taken from legend or remote history and involving incidents of a certain magnitude. The action is complete in itself, is treated in a serious manner, and is normally interpreted so as to exhibit some religious, moral, or political significance. Tragedy is written in verse, and the scenes of spoken verse are marked off by choral songs or other lyrics. No intermissions occur within a play. The ending may be a happy solution, but usually it involves a reversal of fortune from good to bad and is tragic in the modern sense of the word.⁵

T. D. Goodell says that in the Greek conception a tragic story must exhibit suffering of immortals or of mortals in high

³Ibid., p. 417

⁴Ibid.

⁵P. W. Marsh, A Handbook of Classical Drama, p. 3.

estate, which may, however, end without a catastrophe. Yet, he adds, it must not lose the tone of seriousness and dignity.⁶

Comedy was first officially recognized at Athens in 486 B.C.⁷ Aristotle says comedy is an imitation of bad characters.⁸ Comedy of the fifth century B. C. was very different from the later types, and is called Old Comedy. Old Comedy is one of the "sports" of literature. It was fantastic from the very beginning, and it deliberately cultivated its perversity.

Subject Matter of Greek Tragedy

Legends, myths, or contemporary events served as the subject matter of Greek tragedy. Almost any legendary subject was considered fitting for tragedy, and some few plays were written on contemporary events. Fiction was generally avoided, but invention and innovation were freely practiced and even advocated by Aristotle. The dignity and power of Greek tragedy may be due in part to the legendary subjects. The dramatists seemed to feel, as Aristotle did, that to be most effective tragedy must deal with illustrious persons and significant events.

Grecian Drama in Verse

All Greek tragedy and comedy were written in verse, with the exception of some occasional lines of prose in the comedies of Aristophanes. The verse was almost invariably written in the

⁶T. D. Goodell, Athenian Tragedy, p. 75.

⁷P. W. Harsh, op. cit., p. 146.

⁸Aristotle, op. cit., p. 415.

simplest of all Greek meters and the one most closely approaching natural conversation. It was spoken without musical accompaniment, and it is similar to blank verse in English. Shifts in meter would heighten excitement, forecast tragedy, or relieve tension. The verse was sung and accompanied by mimetic dancing where melody and dance were thought appropriate.

Structure of Greek Tragedy

The structure of Greek tragedies differs greatly, but in general follows a certain form. Almost all the later tragedies begin with an iambic scene, either a monologue or a dialogue, called the Prologos. This scene is devoted mainly to exposition. The Chorus may enter chanting or they may begin immediately with their first lyric. This chanting or lyric also is somewhat expository but it helps primarily to strike the proper emotional tone. After the Parados follows the Episode. The first Episode usually is concerned with the beginning of the action and the complication of the plot. The Episodes are artistically constructed usually as distinct phases of the action. No consistent effort is made to have them, like acts in a modern play, end in a climax. Another complete choral song, called the first Stasimon, follows the Episode. After the Stasimon, another Episode occurs. The choral songs interrupt the dramatic action and mark off the tragedy into the various "chapters" of action. The number of chapters of action varies from play to play. The Oedipus the King has six chapters while most of the extant plays of Aeschylus have five chapters of action. The section after the last Stasimon is

called the Exodos. The Exodos is characterized by two interesting features, the messenger's speech and the deus ex machina. The messenger or god may appear to describe future happenings, to point out the relationship between the events of the play and the customs of Attica, or to explain or interpret the action with an authority far beyond that of the mere Chorus. Deities could also place the seal of utter finality and divine approval upon the solution of a play, and their appearance would make a highly spectacular closing tableau.⁹

The Chorus

A Greek tragedy could not exist without a Chorus, the historic beginning and ever the heart of drama to the Greeks. The first duty of a playwright was to write his story so that it would include the Chorus. Tragedy is said to have developed from the dithyrambic Chorus of 50 persons, and in the earliest of all extant dramas, the Suppliants of Aeschylus, the Chorus actually consists of 50 persons. Aeschylus later reduced the Chorus to 12 members, but Sophocles increased the number to 15. Ordinary Greek citizens made up the Choruses, but they were trained and exhibited each year. Poetic beauty was the chief contribution of the tragic Chorus and one of the glories of the Greek genius.

The tragic songs of the Chorus may build up tragic atmosphere as they do so well in the first scene of the Agamemnon of Aeschylus,

⁹P. W. Marsh, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

or they may modulate the tone of the play. Occasionally they bring a poetic relief from overcharged emotions. In content, the Choral lyrics usually have a significance directly pertaining to their dramatic context. They generalize the particular events and interpret the action of the play as the dramatist wants it interpreted. In the Oedipus the King after Oedipus has quarreled with Creon and after Oedipus and his wife and mother have expressed skepticism of oracles and have discussed incest and murder, the Chorus in their following lyrics pray for reverent purity in word and deed, condemning insolence and skepticism and sacrilege.¹⁰ Also, in the last lines of the drama, the Chorus repeats the old Greek belief that no man should be judged fortunate until he has finished his life in happiness. In this way, the Chorus emphasizes the irony of fate which is perhaps the fundamental theme of this play.¹¹

Occasionally the Chorus assumes a definite character and interprets the action from its own point of view. However, it is difficult to determine definitely when the Chorus is speaking in character and when it is again expressing the opinions of the dramatist.

The characterization of the Chorus, it can be seen, would necessarily be less formal and consistent than the characterization of the individual actors in the play. In the Agamemnon by Aeschylus, this situation is quite apparent. The opening lines

¹⁰W. J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr., op. cit., pp. 408-409.

¹¹Ibid., p. 417.

of the Chorus are steeped in beauty of pathos,¹² but in the scene with Cassandra, they are almost stupid.¹³ The Chorus appears as 12 pitifully weak old men when the dying cries of Agamemnon are heard,¹⁴ but they evidently seize their arms and are ready to risk their lives in opposing Aegisthus when they are insulted by him.¹⁵

The minor dramatic functions of the Chorus are many and various. The earliest one was to act as an interlocutor for the actor present. The function was probably performed by the leader of the Chorus, the Coryphaeus.¹⁶ This function of interlocutor was kept throughout all Grecian tragedy. Another function of the Chorus was to introduce a character entering the scene for the first time. This was no doubt brought about in a dramatic manner--we can see the interlocutor announcing to the Chorus the entrance of the new character, and we can see the entire Chorus turning toward that character, thus focusing the attention of the entire audience upon him. The Chorus with intuition approaching clairvoyance could also relate action that was taking place at the same time "off stage."

Soliloquies, Asides, and Stage Whispers

The soliloquy, the aside, and the stage whisper are employed with much restraint by the Greeks. In the soliloquy a person

¹²Ibid., pp. 168-176.

¹³Ibid., pp. 202-212.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 212-214

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 221-225.

¹⁶P. W. Harsh, op. cit., p. 21.

supposing himself alone thinks aloud. One of the best examples of the use of this device is in the soliloquy of the watchman who opens the Agamemnon. The aside seems more suited to comedy. Aristophanes uses it considerably, and the Choral odes occasionally have a little of this character. The stage whisper is much like the aside. Something is whispered in the ear of one character that another may not hear; meantime the whole audience hears every word of it. Two examples of this device appear in Philoctetes by Sophocles and Ion by Euripides.

The Unities

All great Greek dramatists attempted to follow the three unities of time, place, and action. "Unity of action exists when nothing included in the play can be omitted and nothing really pertinent to it can be added."¹⁷ Greek tragedy attempted to keep as far as possible within a single circuit of the sun, or something near that. The continuous presence of the Chorus made it quite difficult to make a change in time or place, since no more than a few hours could be supposed to elapse while 15 men who were an indispensable part of the play remained before the eyes of the audience.

Economy of Roles and Masks

The state furnished the actors for Greek tragedy; and before Sophocles began producing, perhaps in 468 B. C., only two speaking

¹⁷P. W. Harsh, op. cit., p. 24.

actors were furnished. Sophocles demanded and received a third actor, and Aristophanes sometimes used a fourth actor. But Sophocles and Euripides did not use a fourth. Economy of roles was made possible by the religious inheritance of the use of masks and by the continuous presence of the Chorus. Aristotle says it is unknown who it was that introduced masks.¹⁸ Masks served other functions, especially that of revealing something of the identity of the wearer. The characters in tragedy tended to fall into types, such as the old king (Creon in the *Medea*), the spirited young monarch (Oedipus), the old nurse and confidant (as in the *Medea*), and many others. The masks and costumes of these characters were so conventionalized that the habitual theatregoer would immediately recognize them. The reader must remember too that the Grecian theatre was very large, the plays were presented in the afternoon, and that the audience many yards away would have difficulty in even seeing the faces of the actors. When the audiences became so large, the mask was the only means of making at least a general average of facial expression visible. The Greek actor was also increased in size by thick-soled shoes, padding, and by an upward extension of the mask, which covered not only the face but the whole head. The mask could be changed, if there were occasion, at every appearance of a character. That the voice might not be impeded, the mouth of the mask had to be always wide open.¹⁹

¹⁸Aristotle, op. cit., p. 415.

¹⁹T. D. Goodell, op. cit., pp. 69-70.

Views of Fate

An assumption which tragedy seems consistently to make is that over and above man there exists some superhuman power or force. This force appears under various names and in different forms. Oates and O'Neill say:

In the essentially religious Greek tragedy it is represented by the gods or the vaguer personifications of supernatural powers. Elsewhere it may be the Christian God or Fate or Destiny. Call it any name one will, tragedy always presents man as living under something divine or superhuman which partially determines his actions.²⁰

Harsh says, "In modern criminology a similar practice still prevails, and the deities usually blamed are Heredity and Environment."²¹ In the Orestes, Clytemnestra attempts to lay the blame of her husband's murder in part upon the house of Atreus--or Fate. The moral guilt or innocence of Oedipus has worried many critics. Aeschylus interpreted his downfall as due to the sin of his father and the family curse.

The Greek Dramatists

Of the many writers of Greek tragedy only Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides are represented in the collection of plays which have survived, and even this collection includes but a small fraction of the total number of dramas which these men wrote. The literary historian customarily distinguishes three periods in the

²⁰W. J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr., op. cit., pp. XXVII-XXVIII.

²¹P. W. Harsh, op. cit., pp. 101-102.

history of Greek comedy: the Old, which ended with the fifth century, B. C., the Middle, which lasted until about 340 B. C., and the New, whose best work was produced around 300. Aristophanes and Menander are considered the most outstanding writers of comedy.

Aeschylus, the earliest of the three tragedy writers, is now generally regarded as ranking among the very greatest poets and the most important dramatists.²² He was born of a rather prominent family in Athens in 525 B. C. Aeschylus first competed in the dramatic contests in Athens in 499 B. C. He achieved his first victory in 484 B. C. and continued from then on to be highly successful in the theatre. He is known for the Suppliants, where the Chorus figures so largely; The Seven Against Thebes, in which a "tragic hero" appears for the first time; and the great trilogy, Oresteia.

Sophocles was born about 495 B. C. and lived to the great age of 90. He devoted himself completely to the theatre and in all wrote about 125 plays of which now there are but seven extant. He received 20 victories in tragic competition. Sophocles' mastery of dramatic technique is apparent in all his plays, most notably in Oedipus the King. The Ajax, Philoctetes, and Antigone are his other greatest tragedies. In Sophocles there is always present the interplay of the divine and human. He remains on the human level, yet always directs his gaze towards that which is superhuman.

²²P. W. Harsh, op. cit., p. 37.

Euripides was born between the years 485 to 480 B. C., approximately 15 years after Aeschylus began to compete in the dramatic contests. During his lifetime Euripides presented approximately 88 plays, though he wrote in all about 92. In the contests he was successful only four times. His greatest claims to fame rest on his excellent studies of human problems considered on the human level, and his penetrating psychological analyses of his characters. The plays written by Euripides are the Alcestis, Medea, Hippolytus, Electra, The Trojan Women, Orestes, Iphigenia in Tauris, and The Bacchae.²³

Aristophanes was born about 445 B. C. His first comedy was produced in 427 B. C. when he was very young. All together he is said to have written 40 plays. Of these, only 11 have survived. One of the strangest and yet most characteristic features of Aristophanic comedy is its intermingling of serious political appeal, uproarious low-comedy farce, and beautiful lyric poetry. Among his extant plays are the Archamians, Knights, Clouds, Wasps, Birds, Lysistrata, and Frogs.²⁴

Menander was born about 342 B. C. and is considered the best of the New Comedy writers. Menander possessed warm humor and a deftness in depicting character. He is said to have written more than 100 comedies, but of these only the recently discovered Arbitration is preserved for somewhat more than half the play.²⁵

²³W. J. Oates and Eugene O'Neill, Jr., op. cit., pp. XXVIII-XXXIII.

²⁴P. W. Harsh, op. cit., pp. 264-312.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 320-327.

MODERN DRAMAS SHOWING GRECIAN INFLUENCES

The following plays were selected by the author for this work because, in her opinion, they most clearly and interestingly reveal the influence of Grecian dramatic form and art.

A majority of the plays are tragedies. Greek tragedy represents a greatness that has not been excelled, unless, many critics argue, tragedy under William Shakespeare in the Elizabethan Age equals or surpasses its predecessor. The field of tragic writing, therefore, is much more challenging than the field of comedy writing. Works from two of America's foremost tragedy writers, Eugene O'Neill and Maxwell Anderson, are included, and much emphasis is placed upon them.

Thornton Wilder's Pulitzer Prize-winning play, Our Town, has been selected as this play is unique for its "originality" which is primarily adherence to Grecian dramatic principles.

The Ascent of F₆ by two Englishmen, Auden and Isherwood, is discussed for its liberal uses of Choruses and for its poetic beauty.

T. S. Eliot, who was born in St. Louis, Missouri, but who spends most of his time in England, has contributed to the field of tragic-writing the story of Archbishop Thomas Becket, a tragedy told in Choral verse and some prose.

Elmer Rice's The Adding Machine is remarkable for its episodic structure and its use of Choruses.

Each play is discussed separately. Comments from leading critics, explanations by the dramatists, and excerpts from the dramas are included to reveal the specific use of the Grecian technique.

The Hairy Ape

Eugene O'Neill wrote The Hairy Ape in 1921. The author says of his play, "It is propaganda in the sense that it is a symbol of man who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way."²⁶

The plot of the play deals with an "ape-like" or "Neanderthal Man" stoker on a transatlantic liner. Robert Smith, or "Yank," as he is called by his mates, is quite happy in the firemen's fore-castle, working with his fellow "gorilla-like" companions. Then one day Mildred Douglas, a beautiful deck passenger attempts to discover how the other half lives and visits the fore-castle. As she enters, Yank is cursing the whistle that is demanding more and more coal to be thrown into the furnaces.

He turns and he sees Mildred, like a white apparition in the full light from the open furnace doors. He glares into her eyes, turned to stone. As for her, during his speech she has listened, paralyzed with horror, terror, her whole personality crushed, beaten in, collapsed, by the terrific impact of this unknown, abysmal brutality, naked and shameless. As she looks at his gorilla face, as his eyes bore into hers, she utters a low, choking cry and shrinks away from him, putting both hands up before her eyes to shut out the sight of his face, to protect her own. This startles Yank to a reaction. His mouth falls open, his eyes grow bewildered.²⁷

"Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast!" Mildred whimpers, and then faints.

²⁶Barrett Clark, Eugene O'Neill, p. 127.

²⁷Eugene O'Neill, Nine Plays, p. 58.

Yank is shaken from the complacency of his old environment and becomes a brooding, pitiable character. During a shore leave, he visits a monkey house at the Zoo. On one cage a sign with the word, "Gorilla," stands out. Yank pounds on the cage with his fists. The gorilla rattles the bars of his cage and snarls. All the other monkeys set up an angry chattering in the darkness.

Yank goes on excitedly, "Sure! Dat's de way it hits me too, On'y you're lucky, see? Yuh don't belong wit 'em and you know it. But me, I belong with 'em--but I don't see. Dey don't belong wit me, dat's what. Get me? Tinkin' is hard--It's dis way, what I'm drivin' at. Youse can sit and dope dream in de past, green woods, de jungle and de rest of it. Den yuh belong and dey don't. Den yuh kin laugh at 'em, see? Yuh're de champ of de woid. But me--I ain't got no past to tink in, nor nothin' dat's comin', on'y what's now--and dat don't belong. I ain't on oith and I ain't in heaven, get me? I'm in de middle tryin' to separate 'em, takin' all de woist punches from bot' of 'em.²⁸

Yank forces the lock on the cage door, and the gorilla scrambles out of his cage, wraps Yank in a murderous hug, and throws the crushed body to the floor of the cage, then shuffles off into the darkness. Yank painfully hauls himself to his feet and grabs hold of the bars of the cage, looking around him in a bewildered manner. He forces a mocking laugh, "In de cage, huh? Ladies and gentlemen, step forward and take a slant at de one and only--(His voice weakening) one and original--Hairy Ape from de wilds of---." (He slips in a heap on the floor and dies).²⁹

Concerning his views of fate used in this play, O'Neill says, "Yank can't go forward, and so he tries to go back. This is what his shaking hands with the gorilla meant. But he can't go back to

²⁸ Ibid., p. 86.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 87-88.

'belonging' either. The gorilla kills him. The subject here is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the one subject for drama, and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the gods, but is now with himself, his own past, his attempt 'to belong.'³⁰

There is found a use of the Chorus in the background voices of the men as they shout words of caution to Yank or "talk" to the open furnaces. An example of the use is found in the following excited words screamed by Yank's friends after Mildred has fainted at sight of him:

Voices: Stop him!
 He'll get shot!
 He'll murder her!
 Trip him up!
 Hold him!
 He's gone crazy!
 Gott, he's strong!
 Hold him down!
 Look out for a kick!
 Pin his arms!³¹

Mr. John Corbin, drama critic writing for Saturday Review of Literature, states, "In The Hairy Ape, Yank in his own environment remained in his normal mood and his normal guise. Under scorn for him shown by the beautiful deck passenger, the use of a mask was employed to show Yank's transformation."³²

³⁰Barrett Clark, op. cit., p. 127.

³¹Eugene O'Neill, op. cit., p. 59.

³²John Corbin, "O'Neill and Aeschylus," Saturday Review of Literature, VIII(April 30, 1932), p. 694.

Desire Under the Elms

In 1933 Barrett Clark wrote of Desire Under the Elms, "This play, written by O'Neill in 1924, marks the highest point so far in O'Neill's development as a tragic writer--the highest point of achievement, but not of aim. In this play he has sounded the depths. He faces life with courage and sanity."³³

Two years before the play was acted, O'Neill wrote the following statement for the Philadelphia Public Ledger, January 22, 1922:

Sure I'll write about happiness if I can happen to meet up with that luxury, and find it sufficiently dramatic and in harmony with any deep rhythm in life. But happiness is a word. What does it mean? Exaltation; an intensified feeling of the significant worth of man's being and becoming? Well, if it means that--and not a mere smirking contentment with one's lot--I know there is more of it in one real tragedy than in all the happy-ending plays ever written. It's mere present-day judgement to think of tragedy as unhappy! The Greeks and the Elizabethans knew better. They felt the tremendous lift to it. It roused them spiritually to a deeper understanding of life. Through it they found release from the petty considerations of everyday existence. They saw their lives ennobled by it. A work of art is always happy; all else is unhappy.....I don't love life because it's pretty. Prettiness is only clothes-deep. I am a truer lover than that. I love it naked. There is beauty to me even in its ugliness.³⁴

Joseph Wood Krutch says the themes of Desire Under the Elms are the themes of the oldest and most eternally interesting tragic legends here freshly embodied in a tale native to the American soil.³⁵

³³Barrett Clark, op. cit., p. 146.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 146-147.

³⁵Joseph Wood Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918, p. 94.

O'Neill places his characters in New England, chiefly because, it is Krutch's viewpoint, the stern repressions of puritan customs make the kind of explosion with which he proposed to deal particularly picturesque and particularly violent and because it is necessary to give every dramatic story some local habitation and name.

The chief characters are Ephraim Cabot, a hardy and self-righteous patriarch; Eben, a son by his second wife; and Abbie Putnam, a proud and ambitious young woman who has married Ephraim in his old age.

There is a three-cornered struggle for power. The patriarch will yield nothing; Abbie schemes to secure for herself and her children the farm on which they all live; Eben is determined to escape the domination of the patriarch and also to retain the rights of the eldest son now threatened by Abbie. She realizes that an heir of her own would be the surest road to her purpose and undertakes to seduce Eben by whom she hopes to bear a son to be foisted upon the patriarch as his own. Eben resents her as the usurper of his mother's place but he succumbs to the feeling that he will revenge his mother and establish his own spiritual independence if he steals Ephraim's wife. Presently the son is born. Ephraim is now beside himself with triumph, quarrels with Eben whom he tells that Abbie has always despised him, and gloats over the fact that her son will inherit the farm. Feeling now that Abbie has merely used him, Eben rejects her protestations that it is now he whom she loves, and Abbie, taking the only way to prove that she no longer cares chiefly for her claim on the farm, kills the child. Eben, horrified and furious, goes off to call the sheriff, but when the sheriff comes, he declares himself a partner in the crime and wins the grudging admiration even of Ephraim.³⁶

Eben, thinks his father, is at least hard--not soft like the other sons who have left the farm to seek gold in California. "God's hard, not easy! Mebbe they's easy gold in the West but

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 94-99.

it hain't God's. It hain't for me. I kin hear his voice warnin' me agen to be hard and stay on my farm. I kin see his hand usin' Eben t'steal t'keep me from weakness. I kin feel I be in the palm o' His hand, His fingers guiding' me. (A pause--then he mutters sadly) It's a-goin' t'be lonesomer now than ever it was afore--an' I'm gittin' old, Lord--ripe on the bow--(Then stiffening) Waal--what d'ye want? God's lonesome, hain't He? God's hard an' lonesome."³⁷

As the sheriff is about to lead the two murderers away, Abbie turns to say, "I love ye, Eben," and he replies, "I love ye, Abbie." Then the sheriff looks enviously about and remarks to a companion, "It's a jimdandy farm, no denyin'. Wished I owned it."³⁸ And the curtain goes down.

The struggle of the son against the father, the son's resentment of the intruding woman, canonical incest itself, are part of the story whose interest is deeper than any local creed or any temporary society, whether of our own time or of another. It is one of the great achievements of the play that it makes us feel them not merely as violent events but as mysteriously fundamental in the human story and hence raises the actors in them somehow above the level of mere characters in a single play, giving them something which suggests the kind of undefined meaning which we feel in an Oedipus or a Hamlet.

O'Neill's fondness for violent situation has always offended some. Many found it merely gratuitous in a play like Desire Under the Elms whose plot seemed invented for no purpose beyond that of providing blood and horror. The tragedy of mere lust and blood belongs, they argued, to a more primitive age, and incest is not one of the crimes by which contemporary society finds itself seriously threatened. But sensible as such

³⁷ Eugene O'Neill, op. cit., pp. 204-205.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 205-206.

criticisms may at first sight appear, it is worth remembering that they might have been made with almost equal pertinence against Aeschylus or Sophocles. The adventures of Oedipus or Jason do not suggest the home life of a Greek in the Periclean age. Their legends were already remote, archaic, and monstrous. The horror of the plays was for the Greeks, as it is for us, nightmarish rather than immediately pertinent, and the singular hold which they continue to have upon the imagination is somehow connected with fact. Nor is it necessary to agree upon any explanation of that fact in order to agree upon recognizing it. Perhaps tragedy seems grandest when the soul is purged of just such terrors for the very reason that, being so buried and so cut off from conscious life, they can be reached in no other way and find in stories concerned with the ancient themes the only channels through which they may be discharged. That O'Neill should be led back to them as the result, not of academic imitations of older literature, but of the independent exercise of his imagination, is one more indication of the power of that imagination. He has a right to be judged according to his success in making something of these themes, and not prejudged merely because he has discovered for himself situations akin to those which have occupied some of the greatest tragic writers. It is not only that the personages of Desire Under the Elms are involved in a story which suggests their kinship with the enduring legends of the race. They are also personages who, in the sense so important to their creator, 'belong' to something. They 'belong' both to their soil and to the traditions of their culture; to both of these they feel an obligation which, when it comes into conflict with individual desires, is the source of conflicts which shake them to the bottom of their souls. An old Ephraim at least belongs also to God. That God may be, as he says, hard and lonesome. Rationally there may be something absurd in his thorough-going identification of himself and his will with the personality and the will of God. But that identification gives him stature. It gives him strength of passion in his struggle with the son whom he feels it necessary to subdue and with the young wife in whose arms he hopes to defy time. It also gives dignity and elevation and a kind of grandeur to the end where he is spiritually triumphant in defeat.³⁹

As for Eben and Abbie, they are taken off by the sheriff and his men, happy and exultant in their complete absorption

³⁹ Krutch, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-100.

of one another. "They have drunk deep of the draught of life and passion, and they have no regrets. They have passed out of the realm where tragedy--as it is ordinarily understood--can touch them."⁴⁰

⁴⁰Clark, op. cit., p. 151.

The Great God Brown

The Great God Brown, written in 1925 by Eugene O'Neill, was produced at the Greenwich Village Theatre in January, 1926. "This play," Barrett Clark states, "as far as its conception is concerned, is one of the most subtly beautiful things O'Neill has ever written. In it he has striven to tell, in a vibrant lyrical style, of man's aspirations; it is a dramatic paean to man's struggle to identify himself with nature. The tone through out is mystically ecstatic. As in all his mature plays, man's way is seen passing through the vale of tragedy, but it emerges triumphant."⁴¹

"So far as I know," says Kenneth Macgowan in the program notes, "O'Neill's play is the first in which masks have ever been used to dramatize changes and conflicts in character."⁴²

The mask--antique symbol which O'Neill is restoring to the stage--signifies to him more than a stage trick, or a screen interposed between the crucial self and the bleary eye. It is an integral part of his character as an artist. For, as O'Neill once said, the world is not only blind to Dion, the man beneath the mask in this play, it also condemns the mask of Pan.⁴³

The story is the story of two boyhood friends, William Brown and Dion Anthony, who represent respectively commonplace success and the tortured failure of genius. Brown prospers as a plodding architect. Anthony, having married the girl they both love, takes to drink, seeks consolation for his dissatisfaction with the prim though deep love of his wife in the arms

⁴¹Clark, op. cit., p. 159.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, "O'Neill, the Man with a Mask," New Republic, L(March 16, 1927), p. 91.

of a mystically "understanding" prostitute, and finally dies miserable--though not before, as an underling in Brown's office, he has drawn the plan for a magnificent building for which Brown will take the credit.

On the surface the play is a sneer at poor old "respectability" and a bitter satire upon the popular subject of material success and its over-evaluation. But even when O'Neill touches current themes he is never content to treat them merely according to current formulae. Dion is, as his name suggests, also Dionysus, and Cybil, the prostitute, "Mother Earth." But Dionysus is a tragic figure because that portion of his spirit now incarnate in a modern American boy finds nothing in modern life to nourish or satisfy. Even the best of the boy's companions are too concerned with their small safe aims to be aware, even, that they are related to something larger than themselves. Even Margaret, his future wife, is so alarmed by the vehemence of his declaration of love and by the sight of his real face that he resumes his mask and vows that she will never again see him as he really is. He is alone with desires and fears which no one else can understand and he cannot turn to the pretended religion of his age because it is as dead to him as the worship of that god from whom he takes his name.

He is blasphemous and cynical because neither his companions nor his own intellectual convictions leave him any choice except that between blasphemy on the one hand and, on the other, a hypocritical formalism in which he will not acquiesce. When, in the Prologue, he turns to his parents for love, he finds that the love which they have for him can find expression only in sound, sensible, apparently condescending advice about the choice of a career, and his disappointment breaks out in the cynical exclamation: 'This Mr. Anthony is my father, but he only imagines he is God the Father.' And later: 'Why am I afraid to dance, I who love music and rhythm and grace and song and laughter? Why am I afraid to live, I who love life and the beauty of flesh and the living colors of earth and sky and sea? Why am I afraid of love, I who love love? Why am I afraid, I who am not afraid? Why must I pretend to scorn in order to pity? Why must I be so ashamed of my strength, so proud of my weakness? Why must I live in a cage like a criminal, defying and hating, I who love peace and friendship? (Clasping his hands above in supplication) Why was I born without a skin, O God, that I must wear armor in

order to touch or to be touched? (A second's pause of waiting silence--then he suddenly claps his mask over his face again, with a gesture of despair and his voice becomes bitter and sardonic) Or rather, Old Graybeard, why the devil was I ever born at all?'

Dion is sensitivity and genius but he is sensitivity and genius which feel themselves alone, not only in the world but in the universe; for the universe itself is not empty and the God to which his emotions bid him turn has become only the Old Graybeard of a dead mythology.⁴⁴

In the Prologue occurs one of the best instances of the use of the mask to symbolize character. Dion has just learned from his friend Brown that Margaret loves him, not Brown.

Dion: (dazedly, to himself) Waiting--waiting for me! (he slowly removes his mask. His face is torn and transfigured by joy. He stares at the sky raptly) O God in the moon, did you hear? She loves me! I am not afraid! I am strong! I can love! She protects me! Her arms are softly around me! She is warmly around me! She is my skin! She is my armor! Now I am born--I--the I!--one and indivisible--I who love Margaret! (he glances at his mask triumphantly--in tones of deliverance) You are outgrown! I am beyond you! (he stretches out his arms to the sky) O God, now I believe! (from the end of the wharf Margaret's voice is heard)

Margaret: Dion!

Dion: (raptly) Margaret!

Margaret: Dion! (she comes running in, her mask in her hands. He springs toward her with outstretched arms but she shrinks away with a frightened shriek and hastily puts on her mask. Dion starts back. She speaks coldly and angrily) Why are you? Why are you calling me? I don't know you! (heart-brokenly) I love you!

Dion: (freezingly) Is this a joke--or are you drunk?

Margaret: (with a final pleading whisper) Margaret!

Dion: (but she only glares at him contemptuously. Then with a sudden gesture he claps his mask on and laughs wildly and bitterly) Ha-ha-ha! That's one on you, Peg!

Margaret: (with delight, pulling off her mask) Dion! How did you ever--Why, I never knew you!⁴⁵

⁴⁴Krutch, op. cit., pp. 90-94.

⁴⁵O'Neill, op. cit., p. 317.

The masks are carried by the actors at some time during the play, if not all through it. Each of his four leading characters represents in effect two individualities. The mask or false face is molded in the likeness of the person he or she has become-- another self the world knows and accepts as the real person who is shyly or deliberately or it may be unconsciously hidden back of it.

The rubber masks, slipped over the face or removed by the actor as the scene demands, necessarily confuse the action at times, but generally it is possible to follow the author's meaning as closely, at least, as O'Neill expected it to be followed. Many found the play intellectually intriguing and spiritually stimulating. Others dismissed it in a word as the sort of thing to be expected from the "persistent highbrows of the drama."⁴⁶

John Corbin expressed his view of the use of the masks, "The effect is less successful than in The Hairy Ape. While the actor was talking, his chin worked up and down against the rubber, with the result that the lips of the mask moved with precisely the expression of a goldfish gaping against its bowl of glass. The masks reduced the voices behind them to an inarticulate monotony void of tone-color and vibrant force, and all facial expression to a single idiotic grimace."⁴⁷

Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant believes that O'Neill himself has ever walked alone and seemed a stranger to those about him.

⁴⁶Burns Mantle, The Best Plays of 1925-26, pp. 79-80.

⁴⁷John Corbin, op. cit., pp. 693-5.

He suffered from this isolation and tried to destroy it by putting on a disguise of romantic adventure. "In his photographs you will see a mask of arrogant disdain. The tortured dreamer's eyes, the tossed black hair, with its streaks of white, the scowling, thunderous face--seem also to confirm the legend."⁴⁸

Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt, drama critic for Catholic World, says The Great God Brown is more remarkable for what O'Neill attempted than for what he actually achieved.

However, he has accomplished many significant and--for the modern stage--original things in this drama: chiefly the wearing at times of masks by the characters to indicate changes of mood and character or the soul from the rude gaze of the multitude, or from the polite but complacently unsympathetic eyes of our friend Brown--the Great God Brown of this world. The unseen world has dawned on O'Neill, but as yet its chief significance--if this play is rightly interpreted--is a game of hide and seek amid the porticoes of time. The mask hides the husband from his wife, the mother from her children, friend from friend. At times the mask is removed, and the bright values of the soul shine forth--the wife seen as a lovely and desperate creature behind her mask, with its fixed 'All-is-well' smile; Brown secretly envying the poet his idealism and stealing his mask to woo the woman he too loves; she, unaware that the artist-soul of her husband lies dead under the weight of materialism.⁴⁹

The Great God Brown indeed requires explanation, and this the author himself furnished in a letter to the papers. Mr. Barrett Clark reprints the letter in its entirety:

I realize that when a playwright takes to explaining he thereby automatically places himself 'in the dock.' But where an open-faced avowal by the play itself of the abstract theme underlying it is made impossible by the very nature of that hidden theme, then

⁴⁸Sergeant, op. cit., pp. 94-95

⁴⁹Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt, "The Drama," Catholic World, 122(March, 1926), pp. 805-806.

perhaps it is justifiable for the author to confess the mystical pattern which manifests itself as an overtone in The Great God Brown, dimly behind and beyond the words and actions of the characters.

I had hoped the names chosen for my people would give a strong hint of this. (an old scheme, admitted--Shakespeare and multitudes since). Dion Anthony--Dionysus and St. Anthony--the creative pagan acceptance of life, fighting eternal war with the masochistic, life-denying spirit of Christianity as represented by St. Anthony--the whole struggle resulting in this modern day in mutual exhaustion--creative joy in life for life's sake frustrated, rendered abortive, distorted by morality from Pan into Satan, into a Mephistopheles mocking himself in order to feel alive; Christianity, once heroic in martyrs for its intense faith now pleading weakly for intense belief in anything, even God itself. (In the play it is Cybele, the pagan Earth Mother, who makes the assertion with authority: 'Our Father, Who Art!' to the dying Brown, as it is she who tries to inspire Dion Anthony with her certainty in life for its own sake).

Margaret is my image of the modern direct descendant of the Marguerite of Faust--the eternal girl-woman with a virtuous simplicity of instinct, properly oblivious to everything but the means to her end of maintaining the race.

Cybel is an incarnation of Cybele, the Earth Mother doomed to segregation as a pariah in a world of unnatural laws, but patronized by her segregators, who are thus themselves the first victims of their laws.

Brown is the visionless demi-god of our new materialistic myth--a Success--building his life of exterior things, inwardly empty and resourceless, an uncreative creature of superficial pre-ordained social grooves, a by-product forced aside into slack waters by the deep main current of life-desire.

Dion's mask of Pan which he puts on as a boy is not only a defense against the world for the super-sensitive painter-poet underneath it, but also an integral part of his character as the artist. The world is not only blind to the man beneath, but it also sneers at and condemns the Pan-mask it sees. After that Dion's inner self retrogresses along the line of Christian resignation until it partakes of the nature of the Saint while at the same time the

outer Pan is slowly transformed by his struggle with reality into Mephistopheles. It is as Mephistopheles he falls stricken at Brown's feet after having condemned Brown to destruction by willing him his mask, but, this mask falling off as he dies, it is the Saint who kisses Brown's feet in abject contrition and pleads as a little boy to a big brother to tell him a prayer.

Brown has always envied the creative life force in Dion--what he himself lacks. When he steals Dion's mask of Mephistopheles he thinks he is gaining the power to live creatively, while in reality he is only stealing that creative power made self-destructive by complete frustration. This devil of mocking doubt makes short work of him. It enters him, rending him apart, torturing him and transfiguring him until he is even forced to wear a mask of his success, William A. Brown, before the world, as well as Dion's mask toward wife and children. Thus Billy Brown becomes not himself to anyone. And thus he partakes of Dion's anguish--more poignantly, for Dion has the Mother, Cybele--and in the end out of this anguish his soul is born, a tortured Christian soul such as the dying Dion's, begging for belief, and at the last finding it on the lips of Cybel.

And now for an explanation regarding this explanation. It was far from my idea in writing Brown that this background pattern of conflicting tides in the Soul of Man should ever overshadow and thus throw out of proportion the living drama of the recognizable human beings, Dion, Brown, Margaret and Cybel. I meant it always to be mystically within and behind them, giving them a significance beyond themselves, forcing itself through them to expression in mysterious words, symbols, actions they do not themselves comprehend. And that is as clearly as I wish an audience to comprehend it. It is Mystery--the mystery any one man or woman can feel but not understand as the meaning of any event--or accident--in any life on earth. And it is this mystery I want to realize in the theatre. The solution, if there ever be any, will probably have to be produced in a test tube and turn out to be discouragingly undramatic.⁵⁰

⁵⁰Clark, op. cit., pp. 159-163.

Lazarus Laughed

Lazarus Laughed, written in 1926 by Eugene O'Neill, is a lyrical, wholly symbolical drama in the Greek form which concerns itself with the effect produced by a man, who having penetrated the secret of death, can communicate nothing except his free and joyous laughter.⁵¹ The play was first produced at the Pasadena Community Playhouse under the direction of Gilmer Brown in April, 1928.⁵²

Again, as in The Great God Brown, O'Neill uses masks to symbolize character. He employs at least seven Chorus that speak together and aid in interpreting and heightening the action.

In an interview with Barrett Clark in 1926 soon after the MS was finished, O'Neill said to Clark he thought Lazarus Laughed was the most successful thing he had ever written.

I think I've got it just right. It is, from my viewpoint. It's in seven scenes, and all the characters wear masks. And here I've used them right. In Brown I couldn't know beforehand how the scheme would work out. They were too realistic there, and sitting way back in the theatre you couldn't be sure if the actors had on masks or not. I should have had them twice as large--and conventionalized them, so the audience could get the idea at once. In Lazarus I believe I've managed the problem of big crowds better than crowds are usually worked in plays. My Jews all wear Jewish masks, and it's the same with the Greeks and Romans. I think I've suggested the presence and characteristics of mobs (by means of masks) without having to bring in a lot of supers. I also have a Chorus of seven, who chant together, emphasizing and 'pointing' the action throughout.⁵³

⁵¹Krutch, op. cit., pp. 93-94.

⁵²Clark, op. cit., p. 181.

⁵³Ibid., pp. 181-182.

The cast of characters for the play is long, including Lazarus of Bethany; his father; his mother; Miriam, his wife; Martha and Mary, his sisters; Gaius Caligula; Crassus; Flavius; Marcellus; Tiberius Caesar; Pompeia; Chorus of Old Men; Chorus of Greeks; Chorus of Roman Senators; Chorus of Legionaries; Chorus of the Guard; Chorus of Youths and Girls; Chorus of the Roman Populace; and Crowds.

At the beginning of Act One, Scene One, O'Neill sets his scene and introduces his characters. The explanation reads as follows:

Scene: Exterior and interior of Lazarus' home at Bethany. The main room at the front end of the house is shown--a long, low-ceilinged, sparsely furnished chamber, with white walls gray in the fading daylight that enters from three small windows at the left. To the left of center several long tables placed lengthwise to the width of the room, around which many chairs for guests have been placed. In the rear wall, right, a door leading into the rest of the house. On the left, a doorway opening on a road where a crowd of men are gathered. On the right, another doorway leading to the yard where there is a crowd of women.

Inside the house, on the men's side, seven male Guests are grouped by the door, watching Lazarus with frightened awe, talking hesitantly in low whispers. The Chorus of Old Men, seven in number, is drawn up in a crescent, in the far corner, facing Lazarus.

(all of these people are masked in accordance with the following scheme: There are seven periods of life shown: Boyhood (or Girlhood), Youth, Young Manhood (or Womanhood), Manhood (or Womanhood), Middle Age, Maturity and Old Age; and each of these periods is represented by seven different masks of general types of character as follows: The Simple, Ignorant; The Happy, Leger; The Self-Tortured, Introspective; The Proud, Self-Reliant; The Servile, Hypocritical; The Revengeful, Cruel; The Sorrowful, Resigned. Thus in each crowd (this includes among the men the Seven Guests who are composed of one male of each period-type as period one--type one, period two--type two, and so on up to period

seven--type seven) there are forty-nine different combinations of period and type. Each type has a distinct predominant color for its costume which varies in kind according to its period. The masks of the Chorus of Old Men are double the size of the others. They are all seven in the Sorrowful, Resigned type of Old Age).

On a raised platform at the middle of the one table placed lengthwise at center sits Lazarus, his head haloed and his body illumined by a soft radiance as of tiny phosphorescent flames. Lazarus, freed now from the fear of death, wears no mask.

Kneeling beside Lazarus with bowed heads are his wife, Miriam, his sisters, Martha and Mary, and his Father and Mother.

Miriam is a slender, delicate woman of thirty-five, dressed in deep black, who holds one of his hands in both of hers, and keeps her lips pressed to it. The upper part of her face is covered by a mask which conceals her forehead, eyes and nose, but leaves her mouth revealed. The mask is the pure pallor of marble, the expression that of a statue of A Woman, of her eternal acceptance of the compulsion of motherhood, the inevitable cycle of love into pain into joy and new love into separation and pain again and the loneliness of age. The eyes of the mask are almost closed. Their gaze turns within, oblivious to the life outside, as they dream down on the child forever in memory at her breast. The mouth of Miriam is sensitive and sad, tender with an eager, understanding smile of self-forgetful love, the lips still fresh and young. Her skin, in contrast to the mask, is sunburned and earth-colored like that of Lazarus. Martha, Mary and the two parents all wear full masks which broadly reproduce their characters.

All the masks of these Jews of the first two scenes of the play are pronouncedly Semitic.

It is sometime after the miracle and Jesus has gone away.⁵⁴

The Chorus of Old Men are the first to speak.

⁵⁴O'Neill, op. cit., pp. 381-383

Chorus of Old Men. (in a quavering rising and falling chant--their arms outstretched toward Lazarus).

Jesus wept!
Behold how he loved him!
He that liveth,
He that believeth,
Shall never die!

Crowd (on either side of house, echo the chant)

He that believeth
Shall never die!
Lazarus, come forth!⁵⁵

The theme of Lazarus Laughed is an exposition of a philosophy of life and death. After Lazarus had risen from the tomb and Jesus had left, the resurrected man began to laugh "softly like a man in love with God,"⁵⁶ and preached the doctrine, "There is no death. Death is the fear between!"⁵⁷ The Choruses chant in return:

Laugh! Laugh!
There is only life!
There is only laughter!
Fear is no more!
Death is dead!⁵⁸

Lazarus in his deep faith fears nothing and sets himself against those who fear life in fearing death.

In a letter to Arthur Hobson Quinn, Eugene O'Neill wrote his explanation of the play:

The fear of death is the root of all evil, the cause of all man's blundering unhappiness. Lazarus knows there is no death; there is only change. He is reborn without that fear. Therefore he is the first and only man who is able to laugh affirmatively.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 383.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 385.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 387.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 389.

His laughter is a triumphant Yes to life in its entirety and its eternity. His laughter affirms God, it is too noble to desire personal immortality, it wills its own extinction, it gives its life for the sake of Eternal Life (patriotism carried to its logical ultimate). His laughter is the direct expression of joy in the Dionysian sense, the joy of a celebrant who is at the same time a sacrifice in the eternal process of change and growth and transmutation which is life, of which his life is an insignificant manifestation, soon to be re-absorbed. And life itself is the self-affirmative joyous laughter of God.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Arthur Hobson Quinn, "The Real Hope for the American Theatre," 1935 Essay Annual, pp. 227-228.

Strange Interlude

"In Strange Interlude we again have themes which suggest the ancient ones and motivations which the chief characters only half recognize as somehow related to impulses too deep lying to be rationalized in terms of their public selves. But the setting is contemporary and the stress is laid upon attempts at self-analysis made possible by long soliloquies which represent a much more extensive use of the device than the masks had provided for in The Great God Brown." ⁶⁰

In June, 1926, O'Neill told Burrett Clark about the new play he was writing. "The idea," says Clark, "sounded preposterous: there were to be nine acts, and all the characters were to speak their thoughts aloud, apparently with no regard for the ordinary conventions of the theatre of social intercourse."⁶¹

It was not long after that the Theater Guild contracted for Strange Interlude, and early in 1928 it opened at the John Golden Theater. From 5:30 P. M. until after 11, except for 80 minutes' intermission for supper, the play held closely the attention of the audience.

The play carries four characters through their chief spiritual crises during some twenty-seven or-eight years. Nina Leeds, daughter of a college professor, loses her fiance shortly after he goes away to be an aviator in World War I. Her puritanical

⁶⁰Krutch, op. cit., p. 101.

⁶¹Clark, op. cit., p. 171.

father has prevented the consummation of their union and this precipitates her decision to leave home, at first to become a nurse. Actually she is in quest of satisfaction of her more or less imperfectly felt needs. From this point on she begins to develop into a sort of synthesis of the eternally feminine.

Into her life are woven strands from the lives of many men: of Gordon (a romantic memory and an ideal); of the patient mother-ridden Charles Marsden; of Sam, her husband; of Edmund Darrell, her lover; and later of her son Gordon. For this woman no man is enough. With aspirations that can never be fulfilled, she is driven to meddle in the lives of others that her own life may be filled to over-flowing. At last she is overcome by time and by that very spirit of youth (in the person of her son) that urged her on to rebel when she was young.⁶²

It seems to be O'Neill's purpose to expose imaginatively a chain of events in which a few people exhibit to us their thoughts and motives over a long period of years.

The thoughts of the individuals are exposed to us on every page of the O'Neill play. The following lines are an example of his use of the aside. Charles Marsden has just entered the library of Professor Leeds, looking for Nina. Charles speaks:

⁶²Ibid., pp. 174-175.

Marsden: But where's Nina? I must see Nina!
 Prof. Leeds: She'll be right in. She said she wanted to finish thinking something out--You'll find Nina changed, Charlie, greatly changed! (He sighs--thinking with a trace of guilty alarm) The first thing she said at breakfast..."I dreamed of Gordon"...as if she wanted to taunt me!....How absurd! Her eyes were positively glaring!... (Suddenly blurting out resentfully) She dreams about Gordon. (looking at him with amused surprise) Well, I'd hardly call that a change, would you?
 Prof. Leeds: (thinking, oblivious to this remark) But I must constantly bear in mind that she's not herself--that she's a sick girl.....
 Marsden: (thinking) The morning news of Gordon's death came--her face like gray putty....beauty gone...no face can afford intense grief.... it's only later when sorrow.....(With concern) Just what do you mean by changed, Professor?⁶³

O'Neill said about this play, "If I had had time, I might have told you everything essential about these people."⁶⁴
 Barrett Clark replies, "He did have time, because he took it. The worst of it is he took a little too much time, not his own, but ours!"⁶⁵

Arthur Hobson Quinn speaks of "dramatic critics" who were baffled by Strange Interlude, failing to see that the revelation of the actual thoughts of the characters to the audience while the other characters remained ignorant of them gave rise to a conflict between reality and unreality which was intensely dramatic.⁶⁶

⁶³O'Neill, op. cit., p. 490.

⁶⁴Clark, op. cit., p. 177.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Quinn, op. cit., p. 227-228.

Mourning Becomes Electra

Eugene O'Neill in 1931 produced what is known as his masterpiece, the trilogy, Mourning Becomes Electra. The play is based on the Trilogy of Orestes by Aeschylus (458 B.C.) and shows striking similarities to the trilogy of Aeschylus in its situations and events, in the use of action in one of the plays significantly parallel to that in another, and in interpreting the plot as an illustration of the principle that one dreadful crime leads inevitably to another. Noteworthy, also, are O'Neill's effective use of the "Chorus" as representing "the town as a human background for the drama...", his repeated description of faces as masks, his very effective use of literal repetition and dramatic irony, and numerous minor details reminiscent of Aeschylus.⁶⁷

O'Neill calls his three plays "The Homecoming," "The Hunted," and "The Haunted." Aeschylus entitled his three "Agamemnon," "Choephoroe," and "Eumenides." The first play in the Orestes deals with the death of Agamemnon, the second the vengeance taken for this murder, the third the results of this vengeance. O'Neill's story follows the Greek plays up to the middle of the third division of the play, and there the incest motive, the death of Orin, the brother, and the transference of the whole situation and dramatic conclusion to the sister depart from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.⁶⁸ The blood motive in the

⁶⁷Harsh, op. cit., p. 62.

⁶⁸Stark Young, "American Drama in Production," Literary Opinion in America, p. 286-287.

lover, Adam Brant's relation to the family, is an addition. O'Neill places much stress on Lavinia, but in "Agamemnon" Electra does not even appear. O'Neill's reason for this difference is discussed later.

Aeschylus' trilogy studies the curse upon the House of Atreus and the phenomenon of an ancestral curse. Atreus and Thyestes sin before Agamemnon, and Agamemnon sins in his turn. He is murdered, and his murder brings about another. The "Agamemnon" opens on the scene laid at Argos, where Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife and queen, has as yet not heard that the Greeks have captured Troy. Clytemnestra's daughter, Iphigenia, has been given as a sacrifice by her father, and in anger at the loss, Clytemnestra has taken as her lover, Aegisthus, Thyestes' sole surviving son, who longs to revenge himself upon Agamemnon. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have devised a plan whereby they will murder Agamemnon upon his return. She receives word that Troy has been captured, Agamemnon returns home and is slain. The second play, "The Choephoroe," relates how Electra and Orestes, daughter and son of Agamemnon, kill their mother and her lover to avenge their father's death. The third play, "The Eumenides," shows Orestes driven by the Furies, who seem to be symbols of conscience, but finally absolved of his guilt. The curse on the House of Atreus at last ceases to operate.⁶⁹

O'Neill draws a parallel with his curse on the House of Mannon. His trilogy opens with the mother and daughter, Christine

⁶⁹Oates and O'Neill, Jr., op. cit., pp. 167-307.

and Lavinia, waiting in the house of the Mannons for the return of Ezra Mannon from the war, which with Lee's surrender, is almost over. A thread of romance is introduced between, on the one side, Hazel and Peter, a brother and sister, and on the other, the son, Orin, and Lavinia. Meanwhile Captain Brant comes to call; he pays a certain court to Lavinia, and she, acting on a cue from the hired man, traps him into admitting that he is the son of one of the Mannons who had seduced a Canadian maid-servant and been driven from home by his father, Lavinia's grandfather. She believes she has all her data straight now. She has suspected her mother, followed her to New York, where Christine has pretended to go because of her own father's illness but has in fact been meeting Captain Brant. Lavinia has written her father and her brother, hinting at the town gossip about her mother. We learn that Captain Brant had returned to avenge his mother, but instead has fallen in love with Christine, who loves him as passionately as she hates her husband. From this point the play moves on, with the father's hatred of the son, who returns it, the son's adoration of his mother, and the daughter's and the mother's antagonism, the daughter's and the father's devotion, to Christine's murder of her husband with the poison sent by Brant and substituted for the medicine prescribed against Ezra's heart trouble. Part One of the play ends here. Orin returns, after an illness from a wound in the head. Christine tries to protect herself in her son's mind against the plots of Lavinia. Lavinia, in the room where her father's body lies, convinces

Orin with the facts; they trail Christine to Brant's ship, where she has gone to warn him against Orin. Orin shoots Brant. Christine next day kills herself. Brother and sister take a long voyage to China, stop at the southern isles, come home again. Substitutions have taken place; Lavinia has grown like her mother, Orin more like his father. Meanwhile his old affair with Hazel, encouraged at last by Lavinia, who now wants to marry Peter, is cancelled; he finds himself making incestuous proposals to Lavinia and is repulsed by her. He shoots himself. In the end, Lavinia, speaking words of love to Peter, finds Adam's name on her lips. She breaks with Peter, orders the blinds of her house nailed shut, and goes into the house, to live there till her death. Justice has been done; the Mannon dead will be there, and she will be there.⁷⁰

O'Neill sets the Grecian scene in his description of the general scene of the trilogy which is laid in New England:

The action of the trilogy, with the exception of an act of the second play, takes place in or immediately outside the Mannon residence, on the outskirts of one of the small New England seaport towns.

A special curtain shows the house as seen from the street. From this, in each play, one comes to the exterior of the house in the opening act and enters it in the following act.

This curtain reveals the extensive grounds--about thirty acres--which surround the house, a heavily wooded ridge in the background, orchards at the right and in the immediate rear, a large flower garden and a greenhouse to the left.

The house is placed back on a slight rise of ground about three hundred feet from the street. It is a large

⁷⁰O'Neill, *op. cit.*, pp. 687-867.

building of the Greek temple type that was the vogue in the first half of the nineteenth century. A white wooden portico with six tall columns contrasts with the wall of the house proper which is of gray cut stone. There are five windows on the upper floor and four on the ground floor, with the main entrance in the middle, a doorway with squared transom and sidelights flanked by intermediate columns. The window shutters are painted a dark green. Before the doorway a flight of four steps leads from the ground to the portico.

The three plays take place in either spring or summer of the years 1865-1866.⁷¹

In Act One of "Homecoming," O'Neill introduces Seth Beckwith, the Mannon's gardener and man of all work; Amos Ames, carpenter; Amos' wife, Louisa; Louisa's cousin, Minnie. Of Seth Beckwith, O'Neill says, "He has a gaunt face that in repose gives one the strange impression of a life-like mask."⁷² Of the last three persons O'Neill writes, "These last three are types of townsfolk rather than individuals, a Chorus representing the town come to look and listen and spy on the rich and exclusive Mannons."⁷³

The Chorus in the "Agamemnon" gather before the House of Atreus to learn from Clytemnestra the news that Agamemnon is returning home victorious:

Ten livelong years have rolled away,
 Since the town lords of sceptered sway,
 By Zeus endowed with pride of place,
 The doughty chiefs of Atreus' race,
 Went forth of yore,
 To plead with Priam, face to face,
 Before the judgement-seat of War!⁷⁴

⁷¹Ibid., p. 684

⁷²Ibid., p. 688

⁷³Ibid., pp. 688-689.

⁷⁴Oates and O'Neill, op. cit., p. 168.

Leader of the Chorus:

O Queen, I come in reverance of thy away--
For while the ruler's kingly seat is void,
The loyal heart before his consort bends.
Now--be it sure and certain news of good,
Or the fair tidings of a flatt'ring hope,
That bids thee spread the light from shrine to shrine
I fain to hear, yet grudge not if thou hide.

Clytemnestra:

As saith the adage, From the womb of Night
Spring forth, with promise fair, the young child Light
Ay---fairer even than all hope my news--
By Grecian hands is Priam's city ta'en!⁷⁵

In "The Homecoming," the townspeople led by Seth gather before the House of the Mannons to break the news of Lee's surrender:

- Seth: By Jingo, Amos, if that news is true, there won't be a sober man in town tonight! It's our patriotic duty to celebrate!
- Louise: You ain't goin' to get Amos drunk tonight, surrender or no surrender!
(Minnie is oblivious, staring at the Mannon house)
- Minnie: My! They must be rich! How'd they make their money?
- Seth: Ezra's made a pile, and before him, his father, Abe Mannon, he inherited some and made a pile more in shippin'. Started one of the fast Western Ocean packet lines.
- Minnie: Ezra's the General, ain't he?
- Seth: (proudly) Ay eh. The best fighter in the hull of Grant's army.
- Minnie: What kind is he?
- Seth: (boastfully expanding) He's able, Ezra is! Folks think he's cold-blooded and uppish, 'cause he's never got much to say to 'em. But that's only the Mannon's way. They've been top dog around here for near on two hundred years and don't let folks fergit it.
- Minnie: How'd he come to jine the army if he's so rich?
- Seth: Oh, he'd been a soldier afore this war. His paw made him go to West P'int. He went to the Mexican War and come out a major. Abe died that same year and Ezra give up the army and took holt of the shippin' business here. But he didn't

⁷⁵Oates and O'Neill, Jr., op. cit., 176.

stop there. He learned law on the side and got made a judge. Went in fur politics and got 'lected mayor. He was mayor when this war broke out but he resigned to once and joined the army again. And now he's riz to be General. Oh, he's able, Ezra is!

Ames: Ayeh. This town's real proud of Ezra!

Louisa: Which is more'n you kin say fur his wife. Folks all hates her! Sssh! Someone's comin' out. Let's get back here! (They crowd to the rear of the bench by the lilac clump and peer through the leaves as the front door is opened and Christine Mannon comes out to the edge of the portico at the top of the steps. Christine Mannon is a tall striking-looking woman of forty but she appears younger...Her face is unusual, handsome rather than beautiful. One is struck at once by the strange impression it gives in repose of being not living flesh but a wonderfully life-like pale mask, in which only the deep-set eyes, of a dark violet blue, are alive.)

Minnie: My! She's awful handsome, ain't she?

Louisa: Too furrin lookin' fur my taste.

Minnie: Ayeh. There's somethin' queer lookin' about her face.

Ames: Secret lookin'--'s if it was a mask she'd put on. That's the Mannon look. They all has it. They grow it on their wives. They don't want folks to guess their secrets.

Minnie: (breathlessly eager) Secrets?

Louisa: The Mannons got skeletons in their closets same as others! Worse ones. (Lowering her voice almost to a whisper--to her husband) Tell Minnie about old Abe Mannon's brother David marryin' that French Canuck nurse girl.

Ames: Sssh! Shut up, can't you!

(The front door of the house is opened and Lavinia comes out to the top of the steps where her mother had stood. She is twenty-three but looks considerably older. One is struck by her facial resemblance to her mother. Above all, one is struck by the same strange, life-like mask impression her face gives in repose. Seth goes to Lavinia eagerly).

Seth: Say, I got fine news fur you, Vinnie. The telegraph feller says Lee is a goner sure this time. They're only waitin' now fur the news to be made official. You can count on your paw comin' home!

Lavinia: (grimly) I hope so. It's time.⁷⁶

⁷⁶O'Neill, op. cit., pp. 689-695.

The difficulties O'Neill faced in undertaking such a major work can well be imagined. His desire to reproduce in the best effective manner the Grecian theme of the Orestes, including the Grecian views on fate without the aid of supernatural devices, was an ambitious one. Below are presented his own notes on his writing of Mourning Becomes Electra. They begin in the spring of 1926, when the idea of such a play first suggested itself, and carry through to September of 1931, at Northport, L. I., where the author did much revising of the play after it already had been taken by the Theater Guild. The notes represent a unique document, since they reveal O'Neill's actual thoughts on the play's growth:

Spring, 1926.--Modern psychological drama using one of the old legend plots of Greek tragedy for its basic theme--the Electra story?--the Medea? Is it possible to get modern psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate into such a play which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by?

October, 1928, Arabian Sea en route for China--Greek tragedy plot idea--story of Electra and family psychologically most interesting.....

November, 1928, China Sea.--Greek plot idea. Give modern Electra figure in play tragic ending worthy of character. In Greek story she peters out into undramatic married banality. Such a character contained too much tragic fate in her soul to permit this--why should Furies have let Electra escape unpunished?.....

Cap d'ail, France, April, 1929.--Greek tragedy plot idea. No matter in what period of American history play is laid, must remain modern psychological drama--nothing to do with period except to use as mask--what war? Revolution too far off, too clogged in people's minds with romantic grammar school history associations. World War too near and recognizable in its obstructing (for my purpose) minor aspects and superficial character identifications (audience would not see fated wood because too

busy recalling trees)--needs distance and perspective--period not too distant for audience to associate it with, yet possessing costume, etc.--possessing sufficient mask of time and space, so that audience will unconsciously grasp at once it is primarily drama of hidden life forces--fate--behind lives of characters. Civil War is only possibility--fits into picture--Civil War as background for drama of murderous family love and hate.

Cap d'ail, France, April, 1929.--Greek tragedy plot idea--Lay in New England small seaport, shipbuilding town--family town's best--shipbuilders and owners--wealthy for period--Agamemnon character town's leading citizen, Mayor before war, now brigadier general in Grant's army--opening act of play day of Lee's surrender--house Greek temple front type that was rage in first half nineteenth century (this fits in well and absolutely justifiable, not forced Greek similarity). This home of New England house of Atreus--was built in 1830, say by Atreus character, Agamemnon's father--grotesque perversion of everything Greek temple expressed of meaning of life. (New England background best possible dramatically for Greek plot of crime and retribution chain of fate. Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment. Orestes' furies within him, his conscience, etc.).

Cap d'ail, France, May, 1929.--Greek tragedy plot idea--Names of characters--use characteristic names with some similarity to Greek ones--for main characters, at least--but don't strain after this and make it a stunt--no real importance, only convenience in picking--right names always tough job.

Cap d'ail, France, May, 1929.--No chance getting full value material into one play or even two--must follow Greek practice and make it trilogy--first play Agamemnon's home-coming and murder--second, Electra's revenge on mother and lover, using Orestes to help her--third play, retribution Orestes and Electra. Give each play a separate title--Mourning Becomes Electra, title for trilogy as whole--first play, "Homecoming"--second, (?) --third, "The Haunted."

Cap d'ail, France, May, 1929.--Technique--for first draft use comparatively straight realism--this first draft only for purpose of getting plot material into definite form--then lay aside for period and later decide how to go on to final version--what departures necessary--whether to use masks, soliloquies, asides, etc.

Le Plessis, St. Antoine-du-Rocher, July 20, 1929.--
Finished scenario first play, "Homecoming."

Le Plessis, St. Antoine-du-Rocher, July 21, 1929.--
Finished scenario second play, "The Haunted"-- what an
advantage it was for authors in other times who wrote
about kings--could commit murder without having to dodge
detection, arrest, trial scenes for their characters--
I have to waste lot of ingenuity enable my plotters to
get away with it without suspicion! Still even history
of comparatively recent crimes (where they happen among
people supposedly respectable) shows rural authorities
easily hoodwinked--poisoning of Mannon in "Homecoming"
would probably never be suspected (under same circum-
stances) even in New England town of today, let alone
in 1865.

LePlessis, August, 1929.--Finished scenario third
play, "The Haunted"--have given Yankee Electra tragic
end worthy of her--and Orestes, too.

Le Plessis, October, 1929.--After several false
starts, all rotten, think I have hit right line for
first draft now.

Le Plessis, March 27, 1930.--Read over first draft
M. B. L.--scrawny stuff, but serves purpose of first
draft--parts damned thrilling but lots more lousy--not
enough meat--don't like Aegisthus character--hackneyed
and thin--must find new one--not enough of sense of fate
hovering over character, fate of family--living in the
house built by Atreus' hatred (AbeMannon)--a psychologic-
al fate--reading first draft I get feeling more of my
idea was left out of play than there is in it!--in next
version I must correct this at all costs--run the risk
of going to other cluttered up extreme--use every means
to gain added depth and scope--can always cut if neces-
sary--will write second draft, using half masks and an
Interlude technique (combination Lazarus and Interlude)
and see what can be gotten out of that--think these
will aid me to get just right effect--must get more
distance and perspective--more sense of fate--more sense
of the unreal behind what we call reality which is the
real reality!--the unrealistic truth wearing the mask
lying reality, that is the right feeling for this
trilogy, if I can only catch it!-----Characterization--
exclude as far as possible and consistent with living
people, the easy superficial characterization of in-
dividual mannerisms--unless these mannerisms are in-
evitable fingerprints of inner nature--essential reve-
lations. This applies to main people of trilogy.
Town's folk, on the other hand, should be confined to
interior characterization--main characters to interior--

Peter and Hazel should be almost characterless, judge from either of these angles--they are the untroubled, contented "good."

The chanty "Shenandoah" use this more--as a sort of theme song--its simple, sad rhythm of hopeless sea longing peculiarly significant--even the stupid words have striking meaning when considered in relation to tragic events of play---

In my scrawny first draft bare melodrama of plot runs away with my intent--this must be corrected in second draft--the unavoidable melodramatic action must be felt as working out of psychic fate from past--thereby attain tragic significance--or else--!--a hell of a problem, a modern tragic interpretation of classic fate without benefit of gods--for it must, before everything, remain modern psychological play--fate springing out of the family.....

Le Plessis, July 11, 1930.--Finished second draft--feel drained out--have been working afternoon and night every day without a single let-up--never worked so intensively over such a long period as I have on this damn trilogy--wish now I'd never attempted the damn thing--bitten off more than can chew!--too close to it to see anything but blur of words--discouraged reaction natural now--after all, do know I was deeply moved by each play as I wrote it--that test has always proved valid heretofore--lay it aside now--we are off to Paris tomorrow--

Le Plessis, July 18, 1930.--Read the trilogy--much better than I feared--but needs a lot more work before it will be anything like right--chief thing, thought--asides now seem entirely unnecessary--don't reveal anything about the characters I can't bring out quite naturally in their talk or their soliloquies when alone.....

Le Plessis, July 19, 1930.--Read trilogy again--don't like the soliloquies in their present disjointed, thought-prose formula--and my use of the half-masks on the main protagonists seems to obscure meaning of resemblance between characters instead of dramatically intensifying this meaning...Rewrite all soliloquies in plays along this line--introduce new ones so that soliloquies will recur in a fixed pattern throughout, fitting into structural pattern repeated in each play--try for prose with simple, forceful repeating accent and rhythm which will express driving, insistent compulsion of passions engendered in family past, which constitute family fate.....

Le Plessis, July 20, 1930.--Start rewriting, cutting out all asides, stylizing soliloquies as per new conception--think I have hit on right rhythm of prose--monotonous, simple words driving insistence--tom-tom from Jones in thought repetition.

Le Plessis, September 16, 1930.--Finished rewriting--lay aside for while--one thing am certain of now, omitting asides has helped plays enormously.

Le Plessis, September 20, 1930.--Read and carefully reread this last stylized-soliloquies version--absolutely convinced won't so--feel as I felt about asides in version before this, that they held up plays, break rhythm, clog flow of dramatic development, reveal nothing of characters' motives, secret desires or dreams that can't be shown directly or clearly suggested in their pantomime or talk--some of these soliloquies are gratifying as pieces of writing in themselves (most of them are not!), but even they don't belong--have no inherent place in structure--they must come out.

Paris, September 21, 1930.--Scheme for revision and final version--in spite of labor on this stylized conception am glad I did it--not time wasted--learned a lot--stylized soliloquy uncovered new insights into characters and recurrent themes--job now is to get all this in naturally in straight dialogue--as simple and direct and dynamic as possible--with as few words--stop doing things to these characters--let them reveal themselves. Keep mask conception--but as Mannon background, not foreground!--what I want from this mask concept is a dramatic, arresting, visual symbol of the separateness, the fated isolation of this family, the mark of their fate which makes them dramatically distinct from rest of world--I see now how to retain this effect without the use of built masks--by makeup--in repose (that is, background) the Mannon faces are like life-like death masks--(death-in-life motive, return to death-birth-peace yearning that runs through plays)--this can be gotten very effectively by makeup, as can also the family resemblances--(makeup isn't a lost art in European theatre, why should it be in ours?--only our shiftless inefficiency)--I can visualize the death-mask-like expression of characters' faces in repose suddenly being torn open by passion as extraordinarily effective.

Le Plessis, St. Antoine-du-Rocher, November 19, 1930.--Read last version--fairly well satisfied--got right line to it, at least--and quality I want--but needs considerable work yet--several new ideas I want to try out--may bring added value--not sure--only way try and see--start on this at once.

Le Plessis, February 7, 1931.--Read over--don't like most of new stuff--all right but introduce too many added complications--trying to get added values has blurred those I had--too much of muchness--would need another play added to do it right--and would be wrong even then!--can't crowd intuitions, all hidden aspects of life forms into one work!

Le Plessis, February 20, 1931.--Revision finished--off to Canary Islands now for sun and sea vacation.

Las Palmas, Canary Islands, March 8, 1931.--Read typed script--looks damned good to me--funny how typed pages bring out clearly values that too long familiarity with long hand had rendered vague and undynamic. But plenty of work to do--no vacation here--script much too long, of course, needs cutting and condensing through-out--must rewrite end of "The Hunted"--weak now--Christine's talk to Lavinia toward end bad stuff. First scene of Act I "The Haunted" also needs rewriting and pointing up--flabby and faltering as now written--ends of scenes one and two "The Hunted" need work.

Paris, April 9, 1931.--All work finished--script off to Guild.

Northport, L. I., August, 1931.--Read over galley proof--after nearly four months of not looking at this trilogy, get fairly fresh impact--moved by it--has power and drive and the strange quality of unreal quality I wanted--main purpose seems to me soundly achieved--there is a feeling of fate in it, or I am a fool--a psychological modern approximation of the fate in the Greek tragedies on this theme--attained without benefit of supernatural....

Northport, September, 1931.--Work on second galley--several points strike me--work I did at Canary Islands was of great value in most of results--but feel now a few things eliminated there should be restored--Lavinia's last appeal to Peter near very end--some things in Act II which helped to clear it up--this Act II of "The Haunted" is weak spot still--needs rearranging--but will postpone final decision on this until I hear cast read plays--then it will hit my ear.⁷⁷

⁷⁷Eugene O'Neill, "O'Neill's Own Story of Electra in the Making," New York Herald-Tribune, November 8, 1931, Sec. VII, p. 2.

Mourning Becomes Electra won the approval of both the critics and the theatre public. Joseph Wood Krutch has made the following comments on the play:

It is impossible to say just how conscious O'Neill may have gradually become of all he had learned of his own aims, powers, and limitations in the course of writing more than a score of plays. Unconsciously, at least, much clarification had taken place by the time he came to compose Mourning Becomes Electra. Some time before he had come to realize clearly that he was concerned with "The relation of man to God"--with, that is to say, the relation of man to something, whether that something is the universe itself or merely the enduring laws of his own being, which is in independent of local or temporary conditions. Now he realized also that tragedy is essentially a story of some calamity growing out of that relationship and that it differs from the story of any failure, however calamitous, involving merely human relationships by virtue of two facts: On the one hand it involves a great deal more; on the other, protagonists take on a dignity they cannot otherwise have. But the would-be writer of tragedy today labors under an almost insuperable difficulty. He lives in a society most of whose members are either confused and uncertain or explicitly deny that any such relationship between man and God exists; that there are any problems to solve except problems to be faced by men so entirely the product of temporary conditions, that even their past is no more than a ghost which it is their business to lay as promptly as possible. Nor can it be said that O'Neill has ever completely solved the perhaps insoluble difficulty though he has, I think, come nearer to doing so in M. B. E. than in any of his other plays.

Hence the story itself--considered merely as a sequence of events as distinguished from the interpretation which its personages put upon it--is almost identical with the classical story of Electra and Clytemnestra while the characters are men and women essentially like ourselves. The action is, to be sure, set back to the time of the American Civil War and hence, in years, almost as remote from us as that of Desire Under the Elms. But the characters belong to a different culture and the world of their consciousness is almost as far removed from that of old Ephraim or his son as it is from that of the Greeks. These personages no longer feel the eye of God closely upon them, and they no longer instinctively interpret life in terms of theology. Indeed, they differ from us less because of what they believe

about their relation to the universe than merely because they are not, like us, quite aware either how much they no longer believe or what the implications of their non-belief are. Hence, though their situation is not complicated like that of Dion Anthony by the conscious agonies of lost faith, their story unfolds in a nearly godless universe. A play about them is necessarily a play which can borrow no grandeur from any sense they themselves may have of a relation to the universe more intimate or more clearly realized than ours.

Closely as the action follows the action of the legend and direct as is the correspondence of its characters, the modernization of characters and motives is carried through to the end. O'Neill's Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon and his Electra persuades his Orestes to bring about the death of their mother. But each is also a figure who belongs unmistakably in the historical setting which has been given the play and the motives of each are comprehensible in our terms. No anachronisms of thought or feeling remain; the story is meaningful and completely comprehensible without reference to the older form in which it was told. And yet the effect is also less different from the effect of the classical story than one would have supposed inevitable.

Such changes as are of necessity made in the motivation of the characters do not so much modify the effect of the story as merely restore the force of as much of it as can be made significant for us by a translation into terms which we can still feel are valid. It is true that the characters are no longer the victims of fate so much as the victims of psychological processes presented in a manner which reveals unmistakably the influence of Freud. It is true that Electra loves her father and that Orestes loves Electra in a fashion that the Greeks did not understand, or perhaps, they did not specify. In addition, even that conflict between "puritanism" and earthly love which O'Neill had suggested in other plays here enters again. But such interpretations of such events represent the ways in which we understand these situations, and the interpretations are not argued or insisted upon. They are there because they are, given our intellectual world, inevitable, and they serve merely as the intellectual background of a classical play should serve, to render the action intelligible in current terms.

One may interpret the play as an attempt to discover how much of the effect of a great tragic story like that of Electra can survive the death of the particular culture out of which it arose.

Perhaps the difference between Aeschylus and O'Neill is to some degree a measure of the extent to which the weakening of the sanctions has weakened the emotions which they supported, if they did not create. But the difference between what the Greeks could feel and what we can feel is not as immeasurably great as it may sometimes have seemed when we were in the presence of tale-tellers who accepted too readily a police-court view of human nature. And in that fact lies a measure of the importance of the play. In no other of O'Neill's major works do the characters make with equal success the attempt to lift themselves by their own bootstraps, to gain stature, less by relating themselves to something outside, than merely by virtue of the strength that is in them. It accepts without protest the validity upon its own level of a purely rational psychology. But it also manages somehow to reassert human dignity and to prove by the emotional elevation it manages to maintain that to explain human conduct even in Freudian terms is not necessarily the same thing as to explain it away.

It is like all great literature--primarily about the passions and addressed primarily to our interest in them. It means the same thing as Oedipus or Macbeth--namely that human beings are great and terrible creatures when they are in the grip of great passions and they afford a spectacle not only absorbing but also and at once horrible and cleansing. Once such stories have been adequately reclaimed for us in the only way in which it is possible to reclaim them; once they have been retold in terms we can understand, we cease to be concerned chiefly with the terms and again lose ourselves in amazement at the height and depth of human passions, the grandeur and meanness of human deeds. No one has ever explained exactly what it means to be "purged by pity and terror" but we return to the phrase because it describes, if it does not analyze, the effect of tragic art.⁷⁸

Arthur Hobson Quinn says O'Neill in taking a great plot from the Greeks, made it in terms of American life a new thing.

What made Mourning Becomes Electra such a great play was the inner strength of the characters. No gods come down to straighten things out for Lavinia or Orin Mannon, as they did in the Greek dramas. These New Englanders are brave human beings, facing the consequences of their own acts, in this world or the next. There is no self-pity in Lavinia for her unmatred life

⁷⁸Krutch, op. cit., pp. 104-113.

as there was in *Electra*. As she turned into the empty Mannon house, a sacrifice to her mistaken but lofty sense of duty to keep the secret of the family disgrace from all eyes, those who were privileged to see her knew they were present at one of those supreme moments in the theatre that come but seldom. And even if such scenes and such a play do not occur often, it should be an encouragement to those who are optimists concerning the American stage. The audience may not demand a "happy ending." It demands a logical climax.⁷⁹

J. Brooks Atkinson, writing for the *New York Times*, makes the following criticisms of the play:

Although most of us have been brought up to bow and genuflect before the majesty of Greek tragedy, it has remained for O'Neill to show us why. His modern psychological play, Mourning Becomes Electra, brings the cold splendors of Greek tragedy off the sky-blue limbo of Olympus down to the gusty forum of contemporary life. For the divine omniscience of the gods he substitutes the discoveries of modern science, since knowledge is what this civilization pits against the solemn councils of the gods... But the essential mystery of life still fills us with terror and wonder and fills Mourning Becomes Electra with the same baleful alarms. There are many remarkable things about Mr. O'Neill's single clear-cut master-piece. But nothing is so remarkable as the discovery that in modern speech and modern environment the impersonality of a great tragic-story still lives in terms of mute forebodings. However much you understand the doomed inhabitants of this 14-act play and the causes of their calamities, you recognize their helplessness in the face of powers they cannot control. For Mr. O'Neill has lifted his tragedy out of the miasma of petty emotions to the impersonal plane of inevitable things. Even though he has deliberately gone to these sources (Aeschylus, etc.) for his modern drama, even writing it in three-play form like the Orestes by Aeschylus, he has not played the sedulous ape to his Hellenic forebears, and he has even introduced the Oedipus motive which has nothing to do with the Oedipus story in Greek tragedy. Chiefly he has resolved the whole legend into a grandly exhilarating modern tragedy, arriving at modern conclusions. Especially in the third play, which in Aeschylean tragedy was the moral and religious finale, Mr. O'Neill has pursued his own course as a modern playwright. What he has attempted to accomplish in that

⁷⁹Quinn, op. cit., p. 228.

final play is best told in one of his own footnotes to the play: The Electra figure in the Greek legend and plays fades out into a vague and undramatic future. She stops, as if after the revenge on her mother all is well. The Furies take after Orestes, but she is left alone. I never could swallow that. It seemed to me that by having her disappear in a nice conventionally content future (married to Pylades, according to one version of the legend) the Greeks were dodging the implications of their own belief in the chain of fate. In our modern psychological chain of fate certainly we cannot let her make an exit like that. She is so inevitably worthy of a better tragic fate! I have tried to give my Yankee Electra an end tragically worthy of herself. The end, to me, is the most inevitable thing in the trilogy. She is broken and not broken. By her way of yielding to the Mannon fate she overcomes it.

Is this a great play? It falls short of true greatness, I believe. To be great a tragedy needs some traces of genuine nobility in the characters. For the Greeks that was easy. Royalty was, by common consent, heroic, and all the passions royalty developed were heroic also. In transcribing the Electra legend in modern psychological terms, Mr. O'Neill has no royalty to fall back on.

Mourning Becomes Electra is Mr. O'Neill's masterpiece and also one of the supreme achievements of the modern theatre. It rises out of our moribund drama like a lily from the black slime of the swamp.⁸⁰

Stark Young writes: The magnificent theme that there is something in the dead that we cannot placate falsely is in the Greek plays and in the O'Neill play. The end of the play is by imaginative insight Greek in spirit; Lavinia goes into the house, the blinds are closed forever, the stage is silent, the door shut, the exaltation is there, the completion, the tragic certainty. Finally, the peculiar kind of suspense employed in the play is Greek. The playwright has learned the adult suspense of the classical as compared with the adolescent sense of it, hit off happily enough at times, that reigns in the romantic drama of the North. Classic suspense does not depend on a mere crude strain, wondering how things will turn out, however entertaining and often dramatic that effect may be. The classic suspense has even a biological defense: you know that in life you will come to death, but just how the course of all your living will shade and fulfill itself you do not know, and you are borne up by an animal will to survive, a passionate

⁸⁰ J. B. Atkinson, "Tragedy Becomes O'Neill," New York Times, November 1, 1931, Sec. VIII, p. 1

participation, an absorbed contemplation of the course, till the last moment completes itself. In the classic form where the outcome is already known, lies the highest order of suspense. Knowing how things will end, you are left free to watch what qualities and what light will appear in their progression toward their due and necessary finish.

As to the depressing element of Mourning Becomes Electra, I have only to say that this play seems to me above anything else exhilarating--In Mourning Becomes Electra the end is fulfilled; Lavinia follows her direction, the completion of herself and her own inevitable satisfaction are seen. It may be that here life, as the Greek proverb said, wails as to a tomb..... When the play ended, and the last Mannon was gone into the house, the door shut, I felt in a full lovely sense that the Eumenides, the Gentle Ones, passed over the stage.⁸¹

⁸¹Young, op. cit., pp. 286-287.

The Adding Machine

The Adding Machine was written by Elmer Rice in 1923. It is an expressionistic drama, concerning the curse of common-placeness and mediocrity. By implication, it is also a satire on the mechanized modern world.⁸²

This extremely unrealistic play is episodic in structure, containing seven fairly unrelated scenes. The characters in the play, Mr. and Mrs. Zero, Messrs. One, Two, Three, Four, Five, Six, and their respective wives form a type of Chorus.

Ashley Duker writes of this play: Elmer Rice came along with The Adding Machine in which there appeared not only Mr. and Mrs. Zero, but their friends, Mr. and Mrs. One, Two, Three, Four, Five, and Six. Perhaps Rice's and O'Neill's uses of these groups marked the true beginning of a restoration of the Chorus; certainly it marked a movement to raise expressionism from melodramatic or sensational to the tragic plane. These groups had nothing important or illuminating to say. Their true purpose was to form a background for the essentials rather than the details of the drama. Some gave a hint that they were trying to be a Chorus and to interpret in conscious terms the drama of which they were attendant figures. Although wearing no physical masks one felt they were reaching out and trying to assume masks of tragic significance. In them the classical theatre was beginning to stir again. The idea of choric speech, of the language of exaltation, of dramatic poetry finding impersonal utterance, was beginning to be formed afresh.⁸³

The first scene in this episodic construction takes place in a bedroom, and Mrs. Zero is the only person who appears in it. Her purpose is to give an exposition in monologue form. She sets

⁸² Philo M. Duck, Jr., John Cassner, and H. S. Alberson, A Treasury of the Theatre, p. 893.

⁸³ Ashley Duker, "Re-Enter the Chorus," Theatre Arts, 22(May, 1938), pp. 335-40.

the pattern and theme of the play which is boredom with mediocrity and a life which shows little promise.

The second scene is in an office in a department store and features Mr. Zero and his assistant, Daisy Devore. Daisy reads aloud figures from a pile of slips which lie before her. As she reads the figures, Zero enters them upon a large square sheet of ruled paper which lies before him. In this scene one finds a use of the aside. Mr. Zero speaks and is not heard by Daisy; her utterances are unheard by him, and the audience hears everything:

Daisy: I wish I was dead.

Zero: "Boss," I'll say, "I want to have a talk with you."

"Sure," he'll say, "sit down. Have a Corona Corona."

"I don't smoke," I'll tell him. "Every time I feel like smokin' I just take a nickel and put it in the old sock." "Damn sensible," he'll say. "You got a wise head on you, Zero."

Daisy: I wish I was dead....I can't stand the smell of gas though. It makes me sick.

Zero: "Boss," I'll say, "I ain't quite satisfied."

"Zero," he'll say, "you're a valuable man, and I want you right up here with me in the front office. You're done addin' figgers." 84

Scene three is the Zero dining-room:

The doorbell rings, and Zero goes to open the door. Six men and six women file into the room in a double column. The men are all shapes and sizes, but their dress is identical with that of Zero in every detail. Each, however, wears a wig of a different color. The women are all dressed alike, too, except that the dress of each is of a different color.

Mrs. Zero: (taking the first woman's hand). How do do, Mrs. One.

Mrs. One: How do do, Mrs. Zero.

(Mrs. Zero repeats this formula with each woman in turn. Zero does the same with the men except that he is silent throughout. The files now separate, each man taking a chair from the right and each woman one from the left wall. Each sex forms a circle with the chairs very close together. The men--all except Zero--smoke cigars. The women munch chocolates. Each group forms its individual chorus).

Mr. Six: Business conditions are sure bad.
 Five: Never been worse.
 Four: I don't know what we're comin' to.
 Three: I look for a big smash-up.
 Two: Wouldn't surprise me a bit.
 One: We're sure headin' for trouble.

Mrs. Six: My aunt has gall-stones.
 Mrs. Five: My husband has bunions.
 Mrs. Four: My sister's expectin' next month.
 Mrs. Three: My cousin's husband has erysipelas.
 Mrs. Two: My niece has St. Vitus's dance.
 Mrs. One: My boy has fits. 85

The episodic structure continues to scene four which is a court of justice. In this scene Zero is convicted of the murder of his employer who had fired Zero because the firm was intending to install "automatic" adding machines. Zero is no longer needed.

Scene five is a graveyard in full moonlight. Zero has been placed here.

Scene six is a pleasant place, a scene of pastoral loveliness. Sweet distant music is heard throughout.

Scene seven is an office similar to that in scene two: however, one understands it is no "earthly place." Zero is seated completely absorbed in the operation of an adding machine. Lieu-

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 586-7.

tendant Charles and Joe enter and attempt to force Zero to stop. He resists, and they tell him he is a failure, a waste product. He is a slave to a contraption of steel and iron. And the curtain goes down.

Murder in the Cathedral

Murder in the Cathedral was written by T. S. Eliot for production at the Canterbury Festival, June, 1935. A second edition followed and was produced at the Mercury Theatre, London in 1935 and 1936.

The play is written in verse, as were the *Grecian*. Mr. Eliot goes back to religion for his subject matter;⁸⁶ the first *Grecian* plays were an act of worship. The hero, Thomas Becket, is found in history. The Greeks felt only legendary characters or historical ones were fit subjects for tragedies.

The set for the play consists of a few steps, or platforms, a low white wall, suggestions of Gothic windows, and an arch or two to suggest the place of the play--in and about the Cathedral of Canterbury.⁸⁷⁻⁸⁸

The cast of 80 includes a Chorus of Women of Canterbury, Three Priests, A Haral, Archbishop Becket, Four Tempters, and a Few Attendants. Edith J. R. Isaacs, writing for Theatre Arts, says of Eliot's chorus, "It required a poet's faith to conceive a chorus trained to such use as Eliot makes of the Chorus of the Women of Canterbury, but his faith is rewarded."⁸⁹

⁸⁶Edith J. R. Isaacs, "Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts, XXII (April, 1938), p. 255.

⁸⁷Ibid., XX(May, 1936), p. 341.

⁸⁸Euphemia Wyatt, "The Drama," Catholic World, 148(May, 1936), p. 209.

⁸⁹Edith J. R. Isaacs, loc. cit.

The first duty of the Chorus is to anticipate the forthcoming tragedy. They speak in foreboding tones:

Here let us stand, close by the cathedral. Here
 let us wait.
 Are we drawn by danger? Is it the knowledge of
 safety, that draws our feet
 Towards the cathedral? What danger can be
 For us, the poor, the poor women of Canterbury?
 what tribulation
 With which we are not already familiar? There is
 no danger
 For us, and there is no safety in the cathedral.
 Some presage of an act
 Which our eyes are compelled to witness, has forced
 our feet
 Towards the cathedral. We are forced to bear witness.
 Since golden October declined into sombre November
 And the apples were gathered and stored, and the land
 became brown sharp points of death
 in a waste of water and mud,
 The New Year waits, breathes, waits, whispers in
 darkness.
 While the labourer kicks off a muddy boot and
 stretches his hand to the fire,
 The New Year waits, destiny waits for the coming.
 Who has stretched out his hand to the fire and re-
 membered the Saints at All Hallows,
 Remembered the martyrs and saints who wait? and
 who shall
 Stretch out his hand to the fire, and deny his master?
 who shall be warm
 By the fire, and deny his master,
 Seven years and the summer is over
 Seven years since the Archbishop left us,
 He who was always kind to his people.
 But it would not be well if he should return.
 King rules or barons rule;
 We have suffered various oppression,
 But mostly we are left to our own devices,
 And we are content if we are left alone.
 We try to keep our households in order;
 The merchant, shy and cautious, tries to compile
 a little fortune,
 And the labourer bonds to his piece of earth, earth-
 colour, his own colour,
 Preferring to pass unobserved.
 Now I fear disturbance of the quiet seasons:
 Winter shall come bringing death from the sea,
 Ruinous spring shall beat at our doors,
 Root and shoot shall eat our eyes and our ears,

Disastrous summer burn up the beds of our streams
 And the poor shall wait for another decaying October.
 Why should the summer bring consolation
 For autumn fires and winter fogs?
 What shall we do in the heat of summer
 But wait in barren orchards for another October,
 Some malady is coming upon us. We wait, we wait,
 And the saints and martyrs wait, for those who
 shall be martyrs and saints.
 Destiny waits in the hand of God, shaping the still
 unshapen:
 I have seen these things in a shaft of sunlight.
 Destiny waits in the hand of God, not in the hands
 of statesmen
 Who do, some well, some ill, planning and guessing,
 Having their aims which turn in their hands in the
 pattern of time.
 Come, happy December, who shall observe you, who
 shall preserve you?
 Shall the Son of Man be born again in the litter of
 scorn?
 For us, the poor, there is no action,
 But only to wait and to witness. 90

The Three Priests enter the scene and discuss the activities of Becket with the stubborn King and the French King in ceaseless intrigue and combinations.

A Herald enters to announce to them that the Archbishop is in England, and is close outside the city. The Herald has been sent to give notice of his coming.

The Priests wonder what reconciliation has been made between two proud men: "What peace can be found to grow between the hammer and the anvil?"

The Herald announces that Becket is at one with the Pope, and with the king of France, but as for "our" King, that is another matter.

⁹⁰ T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, pp. 11-13.

First Priest: But again, is it war or peace?
 Herald: Peace, but not the kias of peace.
 A patched up affair, if you ask my opinion.
 And if you ask me, I think the Lord Archbishop
 Is not the man to cherish any illusion,
 Or yet to diminish the least of his pretensions.
 If you ask my opinion, I think that this peace
 Is nothing like an end, or like a beginning.
 It is common knowledge that when the Archbishop
 Parted from the King, he said to the King,
 My Lord, he said, I leave you as a man
 Whom in this life I shall not see again.

And the Chorus continues:

Here is no continuing city, here is no abiding stay.
 Ill the wind, ill the time, uncertain the profit,
 certain the danger.
 O late late late, late is the time, late too late,
 and rotten the year;
 Evil the wind, and bitter the sea, and grey the
 sky, grey grey grey.
 O Thomas, return, Archbishop; return, return to
 France.
 Return. Quickly. Quietly. Leave us to perish
 in quiet.
 You come with applause, you come with rejoicing,
 but you come bringing death into
 Canterbury:
 A doom on the house, a doom on yourself, a doom
 on the world.
 We do not wish anything to happen.
 Seven years we have lived quietly,
 Succeeded in avoiding notice,
 Living and partly living.
 There have been oppression and luxury,
 There have been poverty and licence,
 There has been minor injustice.
 Yet we have gone on living,
 Living and partly living.
 Sometimes the corn has failed us,
 Sometimes the harvest is good,
 One year is a year of rain,
 Another a year of dryness,
 One year the apples are abundant,
 Another year the plums are lacking.
 Yet we have gone on living,
 Living and partly living.
 We have kept the feasts, heard the masses,
 We have brewed the beer and cyder,
 Gathered wood against the winter,
 Talked at the corner of the fire,

Talked at the corners of streets,
 Talked not always in whispers,
 Living and partly living.
 We have seen births, deaths and marriages,
 We have had various scandals,
 We have been afflicted with taxes,
 We have had laughter and gossip,
 Several girls have disappeared
 Unaccountably, and some not able to.
 We have all had our private terrors,
 Our particular shadows, our secret fears.

But now a great fear is upon us, a fear not of
 one but of many,
 A rear like birth and death, when we see birth
 and death alone
 In a void apart. We
 are afraid in a fear which we cannot know, which
 we cannot face, which none understands,
 And our hearts are torn from us, our brains un-
 skinned like the layers of an onion,
 ourselves are lost lost
 In a final fear which none understands. O Thomas
 Archbishop,
 O Thomas our Lord, leave us and leave us be, in
 our humble and tarnished frame of
 existence, leave us;
 so not ask us
 To stand to the doom on the house, the doom on the
 Archbishop, the doom on the world.
 Archbishop, secure and assured of your fate, un-
 affrayed among the shades, do you
 realize what you ask, do you realize
 what it means
 To the small folk drawn into the pattern of fate,
 the small folk who live among small
 things,
 The strain on the brain of the small folk who stand
 to the doom of the house, the doom of
 their lord, the doom of the world?
 O Thomas, Archbishop, leave us, leave us, leave
 sullen Dover, and set sail for France.
 Thomas our Archbishop, still our
 Archbishop even in France.⁹¹

The Second Priest upbraids the women:

What a way to talk at such a juncture!
 You are foolish, immodest and babbling women.⁹²

⁹¹Ibid., pp. 18-20.

⁹²Ibid.

Thomas Becket enters and is tempted by the four mystical figures of the tempters, who are perfectly defined in character and distinguished in utterance and who materialize later in the four assassin-knights.⁹³

The murder that follows is accomplished with as much dignity as significance and the Chorus completes the impressive spectacle:⁹⁴

(While a Te Deum is sung in Latin by a choir in the distance)

We praise Thee, O God, for Thy glory displayed in
 all the creatures of the earth,
 In the snow, in the rain, in the wind, in the storm:
 in all of Thy Creatures, both the hunters and
 the hunted.
 We acknowledge our trespass, our weakness, our fault;
 we acknowledge
 That the sin of the world is upon our heads; that the
 blood of the martyrs and the agony of the saints
 Is upon our heads.
 Lord, have mercy upon us.
 Christ, have mercy upon us.
 Lord, have mercy upon us.
 Blessed Thomas, pray for us.⁹⁵

The curtain falls with the women and monks kneeling beside the dead body of Thomas Becket.

⁹³Ashley Dukes, "The English Scene," Theatre Arts, XX(Jan., 1936), p. 25.

⁹⁴Wyatt, op. cit., p. 211

⁹⁵Eliot, op. cit., pp. 85-86.

The Ascent of F₆

The Ascent of F₆ was written by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood in 1936. The play follows in verse and prose the fortunes of an Asian mountain expedition, led by a young Englishman of unusual temperament and gifts. He rebels against all the values of civilization, as represented most urbanely by his successful and knighted brother at the Foreign Office. The Mountain F₆ typifies the struggle with existence, as opposed to the struggle for existence which his just mind perceives in all the starkness of its cruelty.⁹⁶

Sudoland, supposedly an English colony, is in revolt. The colony represents many British millions, and the fear is that the neighboring Ostnians will push the British into the Sea. Scene II of Act I is laid in Sir James Ransom's room at the colonial office. On the wall, at the back of the stage, hangs a large, boldly-printed map showing British Sudoland and Ostnian Dudoland, colored respectively pink and blue. The frontier between the two colonies is formed by a chain of mountains; one peak, prominently marked F₆, is ringed with a red circle to emphasize its importance. The natives of the two countries call F₆ the Haunted Mountain and will not go near it. The belief is that the first white man to ascend it will be lord over both the Sudolands with his descendants for a thousand years. It is, of

⁹⁶ Ashley Dukes, "The English Scene," Theatre Arts, 21(May, 1937), pp. 355-6.

course, Sir James' idea that the first white man to ascend the F_6 will be his mountain-climbing brother, Michael, thereby assuring English prestige among the natives for at least another thousand years.

The stage is darkened for the next scene, and the two stage-boxes at the right and left are illuminated. Mr. and Mrs. A., representing the "futile serfs of capitalism," do their acting in the boxes, talking in a sing-song manner.⁹⁷ The newsboys act as Choruses and spread the news to all the Mr. and Mrs. A.'s:

Evening Special! Evening Special!
 Ransom to lead expedition!
 Famous Climber's Decision!
 Evening Moon: Late Night Final!
 Young English Climber's Daredevil Attempt
 The Haunted Mountain: Full Story and Pictures!
 Monasteries in Sudoland: Amazing Revelation!⁹⁸

A botanist member of the Asian Mountain expedition is climbing along a ridge after a rare flower when he is caught by an avalanche and killed. The event moves two different Choruses to their commentary--that of the radio announcer says, "He was 24 years of age. He died as he lived."

Mr. and Mrs. A. in their suburban parlor, have a Chorus of their own:

Death like his is right and splendid,
 That is how life should be ended!
 He cannot calculate, nor dread
 The mortifying in the bed,
 Powers wasting day by day
 While the courage ebbs away.
 Ever-charming, he will miss

⁹⁷ William Rose Benet, "Contemporary Poetry," Saturday Review of Literature, 16(May 1, 1937), p. 20.

⁹⁸ Auden and Isherwood, The Ascent of F_6 , p. 46.

The insulting paralysis,
 Ruined intellect's confusion,
 Ulcer's patient persecution,
 Sciatica's intolerance
 And the cancer's slow advance.

"These are simple words in simple rhymes that bring a hush into the theatre; and men who can so control their medium are born dramatists."⁹⁹

After the blizzard on the mountain, the two wings of the stage remain darkened and from them come antiphonal lines, those from the left side being lines of information such as the radio might give, and those on the right side lines of response such as might awaken in a listener's mind:

Left	Right
No news	Useless to wait
Too late	Their fate
	we do not know.
Snow	Alas
on the pass	Caught in the blizzard
Nothing to report	
Fought thru the	Warm,
Storm	in our beds we wonder
Thunder and hail	
	Will they fail?
Yes	Will they miss their success?
They will die	
	We sigh
They fade	We cannot aid
from our mind	
	They find
But death.	no breath

In Scene V, Ransom in the blizzard is seen struggling upwards, then falls exhausted. The light fades into complete

⁹⁹Ashley Dukes, loc. cit.

darkness. The voices of the Chorus, dressed in the habit of the monks from the glacier monastery, are heard:

Chorus--

Let the eye of the traveller consider this county
and weep.
For toads croak in the cisterns; the aqueducts
choke with leaves:
The highways are out of repair and infested
with thieves:
The ragged population are crazy for lack of sleep:
Our chimneys are smokeless; the implements rust
in the field
And our tall constructions are felled.
Over our empty playgrounds the wet winds sigh,
The crab and the sandhopper possess our abandoned
beaches;
Upon our gardens the dock and the darned encroaches;
The crumbling lighthouse is circled with moss like
a muff;
The weasel inhabits the courts and the sacred places;
Despair is in our faces.

(The summit of the mountain is illuminated, revealing a veiled seated figure).

For the Dragon has wasted the forest and set fire
to the farm;
He has mutilated our sons in his terrible rages
And our daughters he has stolen to be victims of
his dissolute orgies;
He has cracked the skulls of our children in the
crook of his arm;
With the blast of his nostrils he scatters death
through the land;
We are babes in his hairy hand.
O, when shall the deliverer come to destroy this dragon?
For it is stated in the prophecies that such a one
shall appear,
Shall ride on a white horse and pierce his heart with
a spear;
Our elders shall welcome him home with trumpet and
organ;
Load him with treasure, yes, and our most beautiful
maidenhead,
He shall have for his bed.

The veiled figure on the summit raises its hand. There is a fanfare of trumpets. The Dragon, in the form of James Ransom, appears. He wears full ceremonial dress, with orders. He is

illuminated by a spotlight. The Chorus, throughout the whole scene, remain in semi-darkness. As James appears, the Chorus utter a cry of dismay. James bows to the Figure and speaks:

I am sorry to say that our civilising mission has been subject to grave misinterpretations. Our critics have been unhelpful, and, I am constrained to add, unfair...We have constantly reiterated our earnest desire for peace; but in the face of unprovoked aggression, I must utter a solemn warning to you all that we are prepared to defend ourselves to the fullest extent of our forces against all comers.

(James is seated. Duet from the darkened stage-boxes)

Him who comes to set us free
 Save whoever it may be,
 From the mountain's thirsty snare,
 From the music in the aid,
 From the tempting fit of slumber,
 From the odd unlucky number,
 From the riddle's easy trap,
 From the ignorance of the map,
 From the locked forbidden room,
 From the Guardian of the Tomb,
 From the siren's wrecking call,
 Save him now and save us all.

There is a flourish on the wood-wind. Michael steps into the light which surrounds the Dragon James. He still wears his climbing things, but is without helmet, goggles, or iceaxe.

James: Michael! Why have you come here?
 What do you want?

Michael: Hardly very friendly, are you?

James: What is it this time? We are grown men now.

Michael: There is no time to lose. I have come to make you a most important proposition.

James: Which I accept--on my own conditions.

At his signal a complete set of life-size chessmen appear. The chief pieces on James' side are Staggantle, Isabel and the General who have been with James in the plot; on Michael's, Shawcross, Gunn and Lamp, the other members of the climbing ex-

pedition. All have on masks which partially disguise them.

James: Before we continue, if any of you have any questions you would like to put either to my colleagues or myself, we shall be delighted to do our best to answer them.

As each character asks his question, he or she removes the mask.¹⁰⁰

Later, thunder and the roar of an avalanche are heard. All the lights on the stage are extinguished. Only the Figure and Ransom remain illuminated. Ransom turns to the Figure, whose draperies fall away, revealing Mrs. Ransom as a young mother.

Ransom: Mother!

Mother: My boy! At last!

He falls at her feet with his head in her lap. She strokes his hair.

Chorus: Acts of injustice done
Between the setting and the rising sun
In history lie like bones, each one.

Mrs. R.: Still the dark forest, quiet the deep,
Softly the clock ticks, baby must sleep!
The Pole star is shining, bright the
Great Bear.
Orion is watching, high up in the air.

Chorus: Memory sees them down there,
Paces alive beside his fear
That's slow to die and still here.

Mrs. R.: Reindeer are coming to drive you away
Over the snow on an ebony sleigh
Over the mountain and over the sea
You shall go happy and handsome and free.

Chorus: The future, hard to mark,
Of a world turning in the dark,
Where ghosts are walking and dogs bark.

¹⁰⁰Auden and Isherwood, op. cit., pp. 105-109.

Mrs. R.: Over the green grass pastures there
 You shall go hunting the beautiful deer,
 You shall pick flowers, the white and
 the blue,
 Shepherds shall flute their sweetest to
 you.

Chorus: True, Love finally is great,
 Greater than all, but large the hate,
 Far larger than Men can ever estimate.

Mrs. R.: And in the castle tower above,
 The princess' cheek burns red for your love,
 You shall be king and queen of the land,
 Happy forever, hand in hand.

Chorus: But between the day and night,
 The choice is free to all, and light
 Falls equally on black and white.

During the first verse of the Chorale which follows, the light fades from the summit, so that the stage is completely darkened. Then, after a moment, the stage is gradually illuminated by the rising sun. The stage is empty, except for the body of Michael Ransom, who lies dead on the summit of the mountain.

Hidden Chorus: Free now from indignation,
 Immune from all frustration
 He lies in death alone;
 Now he with secret terror
 And every minor error
 Has also made Man's weakness known.

Whom history has deserted,
 These have their power exerted,
 In one convulsive three;
 With sudden drowning suction
 Drew him to his destruction.
 (Cresc.) But they to dissolution go!¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 117-120.

Wingless Victory

In the verse play, Wingless Victory, written by Maxwell Anderson in 1936, the incidents and characters of Euripides' Medea are followed almost step by step.

In the Medea, produced in 431 B. C., Euripides turned to the familiar and romantic myth of the Argonauts. After Jason has been ordered by his uncle, Pelias, to find the golden fleece owned by Aeetes, king of far-off Colchis, he gathered a group of Greek heroes, built the Argo, the first ship of Greece, and set sail. Jason obtained the golden fleece, but only through the assistance of the Colchian princess, Medea, who fell deeply in love with him. Medea was endowed with supernatural powers, and she put all her magic to work in Jason's behalf. She then sailed away with him after having deceived her father and slain her brother. Back in the court of Pelias, she contrived his death; but Jason was not able to place himself in his uncle's position, and the pain with their two sons fled in exile to Corinth. Here Jason deserts Medea and marries the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth, in an attempt to consolidate not only his but his family's position in their new home. Medea is consumed with jealousy, and sends poisoned gifts to Creon and his daughter, killing both of them, and then slays her own two sons. She sees Jason suffer as he views his dead children, and then she escapes in a dragon-chariot.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Oates and O'Neill, Jr., op. cit., pp. 723-757.

In Wingless Victory, Nathaniel McQuestion has sailed away years ago from the stern New England coast, leaving behind his Puritan relatives. He returns at last on the ship, Wingless Victory, bringing with him his Malayan princess wife, Oparre, their two daughters, and a maid. Oparre is an outcast in the household and in the New England community. Nathaniel, yielding to his ambitions, commands Oparre to return to her homeland. Oparre knows that if she were to return there, she would at once be slain, and her two daughters treated as half-breeds. She flees to the ship, Wingless Victory, and remembering that her maid, Toala, had brought with her a small phial of poisonous water hemlock, she poisons her children, Toala, and herself. Nathaniel reaches Oparre before she dies, and Oparre says to him, "I loved you and died because I loved you," and Nathaniel cries, "God forgive me if I love you--even dying--while they lie dead."¹⁰³ Nathaniel sails away with the dead bodies, telling Ruel, his brother, "Let sands of years sift quickly and wash long. I shall have no rest till my dust lies down with hers."¹⁰⁴

Oparre, in Wingless Victory, like Medea, is a barbarian princess who has saved from death a man of more advanced race, abandoning everything for him and even committing deeds of blood; she, like Medea, is a "savage bride won in far seas and left." She goes with him to his own ordered land. In each case the pressure of the man's ambitions and the ideals of her civilization, seemed inferior. As Jason had his Argo, so Nathaniel had his Wingless Victory. The barbarian

¹⁰³Maxwell Anderson, Eleven Verse Plays, p. 132.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 133.

princess in each case has two children; in each case the mother feeling herself abandoned, works up a sort of hatred of the children because of the relation to the father: Oparre says to her children, 'Never look like him if you would live'; and in Medea the comment is, 'Let not their mother meet them while her heart is darkened. Yesterday I saw a flame stand in her eyes as though she hated them.' Both are represented as dowered with fierce love and hates. Of Medea it is in the play that 'few shall stand her hate unscathed'; while Anderson makes his Oparre say: 'Guard yourself well who take it on yourself to be an enemy of mine. My enemies have suffered more than I.' In each play, after the mother has murdered the children, the unhappy father arrives on the scene and is overwhelmed by what he finds. But Medea in her winged chariot carrying off the bodies of the slain children is something no modern dramatist could devise, and without such ending of harsh splendor the climax can be borne only by being sentimentalized, which is what Anderson has done to it. His ending, with Nathaniel regretting his abandonment of Oparre and belatedly following her to the ship, is the obvious one expected by the audience, as is the sentimental attachment of his brother to Oparre.¹⁰⁵

Gilbert Seldes writing for Scribner's Magazine says of Wingless Victory, "The play deals with a noble theme, the destruction of human love by the world's injustice. The distant inspiration of the Wingless Victory is, as the name implies, Greek, the legend of Medea. Mr. Anderson seems to have written Wingless Victory for the minute number of those who respond to poetic language in the theatre."¹⁰⁶

Philo M. Buck, Jr., and H. S. Alberson in A Treasury of the Theatre say, "It is good to be able to see the manner in which Maxwell Anderson took the old Medea theme from Greek tragedy and gave it an American setting in Wingless Victory. It is tragedy back again to its original theme."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵Mary M. Colum, "Life and Literature," Forum, 97(June, 1937) pp. 354-5.

¹⁰⁶Gilbert Seldes, "The People and the Arts," Scribner's Magazine, 101(March, 1937), pp. 67-70.

¹⁰⁷Philo M. Buck, Jr., John Cassner, and H. S. Alberson, op.cit., p. 20.

Our Town

Our Town was written by Thornton Wilder in 1938. The first performance of the play was given at McCarter's Theatre, Princeton, New Jersey, January 22, 1938. The first New York performance was at the Henry Miller Theatre, February 4, 1938.

The form of production of Our Town is presentational, addressed to the audience as were the Greek plays.¹⁰⁸ One of the most important members of the cast is the Stage Manager who introduces the persons of the play. He remains on the stage throughout the performance to offer occasional comments and even takes various roles himself.

The dramatic method is everywhere unconventional in the extreme.¹⁰⁹ The story is concerned with life in a small New Hampshire community, and the action is performed on the stage with but a few tables, chairs, and step-ladders to indicate the town's geography.¹¹⁰ The stage manager and commentator acts as a sort of village host by describing scenes and summoning people to the stage to give vital statistics about the town.

Explaining the use of a bare stage, Wilder in "A Preface for Our Town," writes:

I wished to record a village's life on the stage with realism and with generality.

¹⁰⁸Hewitt, Bernard, Art and Craft of Play Production, p. 71.

¹⁰⁹Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama," The Nation, 146(Feb. 19, 1938), pp. 224-225.

¹¹⁰"The Theatre," Time, 31(Feb. 14, 1938), p. 36-7.

I tried to restore significance to the small details of life by removing scenery. The spectator through lending his imagination to the action restages it inside his head...

In its healthiest ages the theatre has always exhibited the least scenery. Aristophanes' The Clouds-- 423 B. C.: Two houses are represented on the stage, inside of one of them we see two beds. Strepsiades is talking in his sleep about his race horses. A few minutes later he crosses the stage to Socrates' house, the Idea Factory, the "Thinkery."

The theatre longs to represent symbols of things, not the things themselves. The theatre asks for as many conventions as possible. A convention is an agree-upon falsehood, an accepted untruth. When the theatre pretends to give the real thing in canvas and wood and metal it loses¹¹¹ something of the realer thing which is its true business.

The story records the birth, marriage, and death experiences in the small town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, 1901 to 1913. Among the main characters are Dr. and Mrs. Gibbs and their children, George and Rebecca; Mr. and Mrs. Webb and their children, Wally and Emily; Howie Newsome, Joe Crowell, and Professor Willard. Wilder in Act I describes the "setting" for his play:

No curtain
No scenery.

The audience, arriving, sees an empty stage in half-light. Presently, the stage Manager, hat on and pipe in mouth, enters and begins placing a table and several chairs down stage left, and a table and chairs down stage right. As the house lights go down he has finished setting the stage and leaning against the right proscenium pillar watches the late arrivals in the audience.

When the auditorium is in complete darkness he speaks:

(The Stage Manager's explanations in giving the setting, introducing the characters, etc. is reminiscent of the purposes of the Greek Choruses in their recitals at the beginnings of the plays).

Stage Manager: This play is called Our Town. It was written by Thornton Wilder; produced and directed by A...and B... In it you will see Miss C...; Miss D...; Miss E...; and Mr. F...; Mr. G...; Mr. H...; and many others. The name of the town is Grover's Corners, New

¹¹¹ Thornton Wilder, "A Preface for Our Town," New York Times, Feb. 13, 1938, p. 1.

Hampshire----just across the Massachusetts line: longi-
42 degrees 40 minutes; latitude 70 degrees 37 minutes.
The First Act shows a day in our town. The day is May 7,
1901. The time is just before dawn.

(A rooster crows).

The sky is beginning to show some streaks of light over
in the East there, behind our mount'in.
The morning star always get wonderful bright the minute
before it has to go.

(He stares at it for a moment, then goes upstage).

Well, I'd better show you how our town lies. Up here--

(That is: parallel with the back wall).

is Main Street. Way back there is the railway station;
tracks go that way. Polish Town's across the tracks and
some Canuck families.

(Toward the left).

Over there is the Congregational Church; across the street's
the Presbyterian.

Methodist and Unitarian are over there.

Baptist is down in the holla' by the river.

Catholic Church is over beyond the tracks.

Here's the Town Hall and Post Office combined; jail's in the
basement....

(He approaches the table and chairs down
stage right).

This is our doctor's house,--Doc Gibbs. This is the back
door.

(Two arched trellises are pushed out, one by
each proscenium pillar).

There's some scenery for those who think they have to have
scenery.

There's a garden here. Corn...peas...beans...hollyhocks...
heliotrope..and a lot of burdock.¹¹²

The last act takes place in the cemetery. The following ex-
planation is given for the stage set:

During the intermission the audience has seen the
actors arranging the stage. On the right hand side, a
little right of the center, ten or twelve ordinary chairs
have been placed in three openly spaced rows facing the
audience. These are graves in the cemetery.

Towards the end of the intermission the actors enter
and take their places. The dead sit in a quiet without
stiffness, and in a patience without listlessness.

¹¹²Thornton Wilder, Our Town, pp. 9-11.

The Stage Manager takes his accustomed place and waits for the house-lights to go down.

Stage Manager: This time nine years have gone by, friends--summer, 1913. Gradual changes in Grover's Corners. Horses are getting rarer. Farmers coming into town in Fords. Chief difference is in the young people, far as I can see. They want to go to the moving pictures all the time...Guess you want to know what all these chairs are here for. Smarter ones have guessed it already. I don't know how you feel about such things; but this certainly is a beautiful place. It's on a hilltop--a windy hilltop--lots of sky, lots of clouds,--often lots of sun and moon and stars....Yes, beautiful spot up here. Mountain laurel and li-lacks. I often wonder why people like to be buried in Woodlawn and Brooklyn when they might pass the same time up here in New Hampshire. ¹¹³

The Dead act as a Chorus and carry on conversation among themselves:

The Dead: (Not lugubrious; and strongly New England in accent)

Rain'll do a lot a good.--Yes, reckon things were gettin' down-right parched. Don't look like it's goin' to last long, tho'. Lemuel, you remember the floods of '79?

Carried away all the bridges but one.

(From left to right, at the back of the stage, comes a procession. Four men carry a cast, invisible to us. All the rest are under umbrellas. They gather about a grave in the back center of the stage, a little to the left of center).

The dead Mrs. Soames asks: Who is it, Julia?

Mrs. Gibbs: (Without raising her eyes) My daughter-in-law, Emily Webb.

Mrs. Soames: Well, I declare! The road up here must have been awful muddy. What did she die of, Julia?

Mrs. Gibbs: In childbirth.

Mrs. Soames: Childbirth. (Almost with a laugh) I'd forgotten all about that! My, wasn't life awful--(With a sigh)--and wonderful. ¹¹⁴

Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times summarized his criticism of the play with the following comments, "Mr. Wilder's scheme,

¹¹³Ibid., pp. 98-99

¹¹⁴Ibid., pp. 107-109.

probably derives from the Chinese and Greek theatres, is the logical way of achieving the abstraction he is after. It makes for complete theatre and intellectual candor." 115

115 Brooks Atkinson, "How They Used To Live," New York Times, February 13, 1938, p. 1.

CONCLUSION

Tragedy to the Greeks represented the most admirable and most exacting of all the branches of dramatic art. As outlined by Aristotle, the tragedy must have dignity and seriousness, must effect a purification, and the ending, which may or may not be calamitous, must certainly be logical.

From the material presented in the discussion of modern plays, it is evident that Eugene O'Neill occasionally attains a close approximation of the Greek tragedian. O'Neill feels about tragedy as the Greeks did. He believes tragedy means exaltation--an intensified feeling of the significant worth of man's being and becoming. One must feel the tremendous lift to it and be aroused spiritually to a deeper understanding of life. It is upon this premise that Mourning Becomes Electra is based. He struggles to give his modern Electra the tragic ending worthy of her character. The critics in commenting on the play have emphasized the logic of the ending given Lavinia. They felt it was not depressing but above all else exhilarating. They were satisfied that O'Neill had allowed Lavinia to follow her own direction, to complete herself.

O'Neill recognized the trilogy form of the Grecian tragedy. He deliberately models his Mourning Becomes Electra after the Trilogy of Orestes by Aeschylus. He is willing to admit throughout that he is "borrowing" from the Greeks in his attempt to

reproduce the Electra story in terms of modern psychology without the aid of the supernatural.

The specific devices he admits using are the townspeople in their role of a Chorus rather than as individuals. Their purpose is to "listen and spy on the Mannons" and to expose to the audience the background of the family. From his own account of the writing of the play, one can see that O'Neill at first wished to use a form of the mask, but later changed this device to makeup which represented "life-like death masks," etc.

Before the writing of his masterpiece, we see O'Neill had recognized the fact that man and his struggle with his own fate is the subject for ancient tragedy and is the subject that always will be for serious drama. In The Hairy Ape this theme is clearly illustrated. Again, it is evident in The Great God Brown, Desire Under the Elms, Lazarus Laughed, and Strange Interlude.

The Grecian influence is strong in The Great God Brown in which the names of the characters, Dion Anthony, Cybil, etc., are symbolic. Of special interest in this play is the use of masks to depict character. In addition to the mask in representing character, it appears to be O'Neill's opinion that people in general wear masks to protect themselves from stern realities of life.

Old Ephraim in Desire Under the Elms attains a certain tragic splendor, and he is spiritually triumphant even in defeat. It is even said of Eben and Abbie that they have "drunk deep of the draught of life and passion and have no regrets. They have passed out of the realm where tragedy--as it is ordinarily understood--can touch them."

Lazarus Laughed shows O'Neill's attempt to manage crowds of people or Choruses, and one learns that he is satisfied with his results. This play contains at least seven Choruses, and the problem would be a major one. Just as the Greeks employed masks to suggest the presence of mobs, so O'Neill uses this device. Again, as with the Greek plays, the mask serves the other purpose of revealing character. The mask continues to be a source of concern for the dramatist. Critics have pointed out that the actor talking behind his rubber mask and a goldfish gaping against its bowl of glass bear a striking resemblance! Lazarus Laughed is told in lyrical verse, which was the medium used by the Greeks.

The theme of Strange Interlude is the Grecian theme--the struggle of man with his own fate. One can see the struggle of Nina Leeds with her fate after her fiance has been killed in World War I. The use of the soliloquy, a device which the Greeks rarely but carefully employed, is paramount in this play. The actual dialogues of the characters are given in normal, conversational style, while their thoughts are spoken aloud in somewhat of a monotone. Because theatre-goers are accustomed to the two-hour convention of a dramatic performance, some persons became impatient with the length of this drama. Others, however, commented on the fact that the soliloquies revealed actual character giving the work an intensely dramatic effect.

In reviewing O'Neill, one recognizes that he is deeply aware of Grecian techniques. Primarily, he recognizes what tragedy at its greatest meant. He is one of the first of the modern

dramatists to restore the mask. He experimented with the soliloquy and was successful. He worked with Choruses until he felt he had attained an excellence of smoothness. He uses poetic verse with skill, and he is recognized by critics and theatre public as America's most esteemed writer of tragedy.

Elmer Rice is given credit for helping to restore the Chorus to the modern play. The Chorus of Women and the Chorus of Men are very important features of The Adding Machine. The aside is particularly employed in scene two between Mr. Zero and Daisy Devore. Mrs. Zero in scene one furnishes in monologue form a background for the play. This monologue is similar to the Grecian Prologos. The play is episodic in structure. It contains seven scenes, and these scenes, like the episodes in Greek tragedy, do not consistently end in a climax.

In Murder in the Cathedral T. S. Eliot uses for his subject a religious figure, Thomas Becket. The first Greek plays were of religious nature. His play is in verse, as were the Grecian, and his set is Grecian in its simplicity of a few platforms and arches. Eliot has beautiful lyrical verse in his Chorus of the Women of Canterbury. The tone of the play possesses dignity and seriousness as all great tragedies should.

The Ascent of F₆ by Auden and Isherwood is written in verse and some prose. Numerous Choruses are present in the play. With the aid of proper lighting, these Choruses are revealed as very effective features of the drama. One scene contains the wearing of masks.

In Wingless Victory Maxwell Anderson follows the story of Euripides' Medea similarly as O'Neill followed the legend of Electra. His Oparre is very much like Euripides' Medea, although Oparre does not have the benefit of supernatural assistance, and so can only die at the end of the play. Anderson is widely acclaimed for restoring poetic language to the theatre. In addition to this play he has written most of his other dramas in poetic verse.

Our Town by Thornton Wilder is presentational in form of production. The Stage Manager is in contact with the audience and introduces characters and locales to them. The bare stage and few bits of property are a Grecian influence. An effective illustration of the Chorus is found among the Dead as they talk among themselves.

The techniques and conventions that have been discussed in this paper are the more deliberate use of them by the playwrights. However, there are other Grecian conventions that nearly every dramatist must heed as he writes his play, even if he is not conscious of the fact that these conventions (sometimes restrictions!) have been handed down to him from the ancient Greeks. Whenever a playwright follows the three unities of time, place, and action--a scene remaining the same throughout, characters not more than six or eight (except for Choruses), and events occurring on only one day, he is, historically speaking, following the precepts of Aristotle and the footsteps of Sophocles and Aeschylus. These are the essential and permanent traditions of dramatic composition.

Ashley Dukes has written:

Were a citizen of old Athens to be translated suddenly into the midst of our present civilization, it is likely that our theatre, with all its shortcoming, would be the only modern institution really intelligible to his mind. Sometimes we feel that nothing essential has changed in the world of the theatre in the course of 2000 years and more. It is certain that the drama may pride itself not only on its antiquity, but on the perseverance of a form that embodies classical conception even in the most modern shape and subject matter.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶Ashley Dukes, "Theatre Tradition," Theatre Arts, 13(November, 1929), pp. 831-7.

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